

**The
SMOKY VALLEY
CLAIM**

by James L. McBride

THE SMOKY VALLEY CLAIM

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

"THAT ledge is sure rotten with gold!"—So prospector Bill Laughlin had exulted when the mother lode in Smoky Valley for which he had long sought had been located by the two lads spending their summer holiday with him in the Alaskan backwoods. But others had cast envious eyes on the rich promise of Gold Creek, and it was urgent that the claim should be registered in distant Valdez.

So Jim and Jake set out on what should have been a comparatively easy journey, but circumstances—and human foes—conspired against them. They were forced to battle their way through unknown territory, living off the country and using every ounce of their initiative and endurance. They braved every extreme, but even when success lay within their grasp they had one last desperate foe to contend with. . . .

Colonel James L. McBride

THE
SMOKY VALLEY
CLAIM

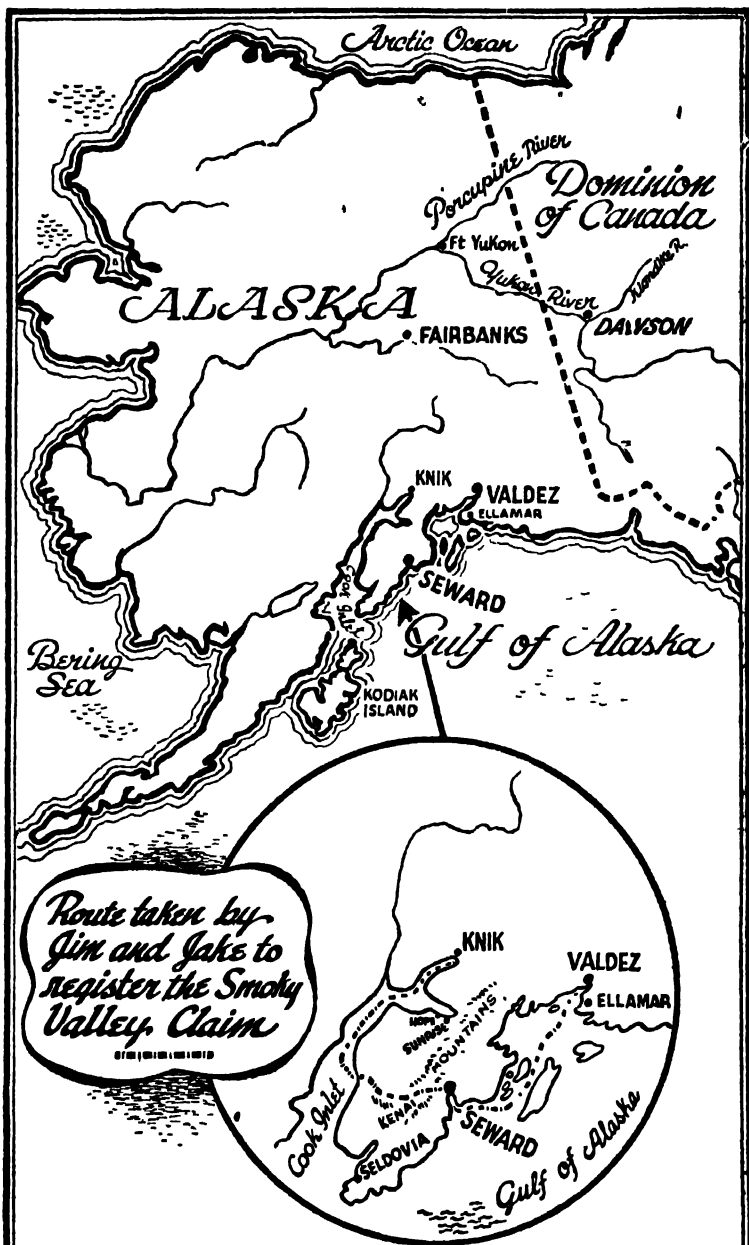


FREDERICK WARNE AND CO., LTD.
LONDON AND NEW YORK

Printed in Great Britain

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. BELOW THE BELT	7
II. OVER THE GLACIERS	24
III. ON THE RIM OF THE MUSKEG	42
IV. NEW ENEMIES APPEAR	52
V. BATTLING THE RIPS	69
VI. SAVED BY THE BORE	81
VII. INTO THE WILDERNESS	95
VIII. WRECKED IN THE RAPIDS	110
IX. FOREST PIG	125
X. BLACK BEAR AND BROWN	141
XI. CHEATING THE BLIZZARD	155
XII. THE UPPER CUT	171
XIII. THE BEAVER LODGE	183
XIV. THE LIFE NET OF SPRUCE	197
XV. THE STOLEN PAPER	211
XVI. THE LOST PROPELLER	227
XVII. THE ALEUT'S KAYAK	237



CHAPTER I

BELOW THE BELT

PROSPECTOR Bill Laughlin was almost down. Old-fashioned "blues" had him in their throttling grip. He could not see any rainbow glittering above his stormy life. He visualized only events that might rob him of his pot of gold that now actually lay at his Rainbow's End.

"Getting this claim filed on," he morosely muttered to the young fellows who stood by, "is a harder nut to crack than a walnut with no hammer handy. There's a lot of things in the road. I'm most sick from thinking someone may get ahead of us without our knowing about it. You two have to be home in a month or so. I suppose you could stop at Valdez on the way outside and file the papers. Jim's ankle won't let him do any hard mushing * for another week. We daren't wait that long! I tell you, every day means a lot to us—that claim ought to be filed on right this minute."

"Well, what's wrong with your making the trip yourself?" returned Jake Smolenski. "I'm sure my legs are all right to do the home work. With that sheep hung up in the meat-house, we certainly have enough grub to last for a month. You don't mean to say that you're scared to leave us here alone, do you? Why, Bill, you won't be gone more than

Travelling on foot, especially across snow.

eight or ten days. I'm mighty certain we can stand guard that long."

"It isn't exactly that," protested the prospector. "The real trouble is that it's almost time for snow to be flying. If it should come while I'm out in the hills, and snow me under somewhere, I'd just naturally be worried to death about you fellows. I can't afford to leave you for too long a time by yourselves. If certain people I've bumped into should see me come out at this time of year, and learned that I meant to return as soon as I could, they'd suspect something was up of interest to them. And then you would have some ugly visitors. Before they came here, they'd lay me out for keeps. What could you fellows do in that case? I ought to go, but I just can't see how it's safe to do it."

"Aw, Bill, don't be an old moaner!" reproachfully said Jim Conover, he of the crippled leg. "What's the use of borrowing trouble? Snap out of it! Haven't Jake and I been here with you two whole months? Haven't you taught us to take pretty good care of ourselves? You don't bother me with these bear stories of yours. We've a gun, and both of us shoot pretty straight. Just let me tell you something—I surely would shoot if I had to."

"Now, now, of course you can shoot," the old man admitted. "But also you might have to shoot! But—what would you shoot with? I burned up the last shell for your .22 on those ptarmigans yesterday."

"What's the matter with your .30-30?" asked

Jim. "Even the sight of that old cannon ought to stop most anybody!"

"Everything's the matter with it. I—I—I broke the spring two days back," was the prospector's reluctant confession. "Everything is just piled up against us, far as I can see. And there ain't no way over or under or around. We're bound to lose our mine." Bill had become quite plaintive.

"Aw, Bill, cut out the tragedy," shot back the exasperated Jim. "Nobody will bother us; there isn't anybody within miles of us. Bill, the only folks we have seen this summer were those fellows that packed our stuff in. And they came just because they were hired to come. You may think that Smoky Valley is the finest bit of ground in all Alaska, but judging from what I've seen, nobody agrees with you except Jake and me. There's nobody coming so you get ready and pull your freight to-morrow. We'll hold the fort, won't we, Jake?" سر

"Why, say, old-timer, we'll simply nail our colours to the pole!" Jake cried as he grabbed the old man by the arm and started him moving. "Get your duds together! You mush to-morrow morning! And if you don't stop fussing right now, we'll dissolve partnership, and Jim and I will keep the mine for ourselves."

The prospector grinned feebly. "Well," he grudgingly admitted, "since you seem so cocky about it, I might take you up. But I haven't many duds to pack!"

"Hurrah for you, us, and company!" shouted Jim. "Jake, you get to work and bake up some

sourdough bread. Put on a big mutton roast too. This scary friend of ours will probably starve on this tremendous mush if we don't take him in hand!"

By this time the old man's smile was a little less twisted. Yet he did have cause to be worried, for certainly the three friends faced a rather grave situation, which dated from the very discovery of their fabulous prospect.

To begin with, these two city boys—Jim and his Polish friend Jake—had been sent to Alaska, consigned to Bill Laughlin for their summer holiday. Under his careful tutelage, they had day by day lost some of their city greenness. They hunted and fished to their hearts' content. They learned something about prospecting, which is an art in itself. Drawn by the lure of a magic stream whose bars and banks for a mile or more above its confluence with the Smoky yielded rich evidence of a lode that must exist somewhere along its upper course, they spent many hours and days seeking to solve its mystery. Their problem lay in this: though gold float was abundant upstream to a certain point, at that point it entirely disappeared. The boys had not been the discoverers of this Gold Creek, as it was aptly named. In previous years, able prospectors, among them old Bill himself, had painstakingly traced this float. All had failed to find the mother lode. But the boys, partly by well-thought-out plans and arduous toil, and partly by good fortune, had unearthed the mother lode. This lode proved to be all that the rich float had promised. Old Bill rightly described it when he said, "That ledge is sure rotten with gold!"

Laughlin had been almost crazed with joy. He was getting on in years, and the many seasons of hardship spent in following snowy trails by winter, and mucking for gold in summer, exacted costly toll of his strength. Two years before our story opens, he had invaded the Smoky country and worked a prospect along that stream. But on the very day that the boys made their great discovery, his own prospect had proved only another vanished hope. But his heartache was forgotten when his young friends compelled him to accept an equal partnership in their find. And it was in joyful certainty that his old age had been richly provided for, that the old man staked out the corners of their holdings, and copied down the description of their claims.

But there was still something to worry about! What if someone else chanced upon their claims and got to the land office first? Furthermore, many a mysterious accident had befallen the discoverers of rich claims. And many the claims that had been jumped by those at whose doors such accidents could be laid, but never proved. Frontiersman that he was, old Bill knew men in that very vicinity who would not hesitate to kill if they believed that by so doing they could seize such a bonanza as the boys had discovered. To insure their holdings, the discovery had to be safeguarded, and proper entry of their claims at the land office must be made. But how were both necessities to be accomplished? The boys might shorten their holiday, and on their journey home stop at the land office, while Bill was standing guard. But here was Jim, the leading

spirit of the two, crippled since the day of the discovery! Had there been another man about the place, the old prospector would not have hesitated to start upon the errand himself. But to leave these boys, entirely dependent on their own resources, a good hundred miles from the nearest settlement, was quite another matter. Still, the filing must be done—a chance had to be taken. The old man, though anxious for the boys' safety, was soon persuaded to take the journey himself.

With poorly concealed reluctance the old prospector rigged his pack for the trek to Knik, where he would take boat for Valdez. He sensed that danger impended over the boys. They for their part were carefree. They enjoyed being on their own. And only after Bill had been gone four days did time begin to drag. They took the task of guarding their property seriously enough, but felt no apprehension. They accepted the possibility of an unexpected visitor and the trouble that might ensue; yet so complete had been their isolation from human society all the summer, they did not actually anticipate such a happening, and consequently made no preparations to offset attack.

An unwelcome surprise awaited them, for early one morning, the fifth day of Bill's absence, Jim was disturbed by a fumbling at the cabin door. Half awake, Jim believed for a moment that some forest animal, made bold by the comparative quiet of the last few days, was seeking inquisitive entrance. Then came a rap, the hard, unmistakable rap made by human fist upon the rough plank door, that startled even Jake from his beauty sleep.

"Who's there?" the boy called.

There was a rustle and then a silence, as if the intruder had made off. But the silence was soon broken by a gruff voice—"It's me, Pete Simpson. Is Bill at home?"

"N-n-no," stuttered both boys. Jim added, "What do you want?"

"Too bad!" rasped the voice. "I'm a friend of his, and 'bout starved. How do you get this door open?"

"It's barred inside," Jim answered. "Just a minute. Jake will let you in."

Jake quickly slipped into his trousers and opened the door. Before him stood a man, fat, dirty, greasy, and unkempt. The boys were distinctly alarmed by his repulsive appearance as he crowded through the doorway. They had seldom seen such a furtive-looking, hangdog individual.

"And so Bill's left the valley? Sorry to miss him—he would have been glad to see me." The stranger was not bashful. "Just in time for breakfast, ain't I? My grub gave out back there, and I thought I'd drop in on old Bill for supplies."

By this time Jake was completely dressed, and Jim, though he moved somewhat stiffly, was not far behind. Hurriedly, one stirred up sourdough hot cakes while the other kindled a fire in the Yukon stove.

"I'm so starved, I guess I'll ask you fellows to deal up the chuck," the uncouth visitor ordered rather than requested. "You won't mind waiting till I've filled up."

Now, the two boys were hospitality itself, but

there was something so aggressive in their guest's words and manner that each felt he meant them no good. Still, the conversation developed nothing of menace until their guest was satisfied and had lit a villainous pipe. Then he came down to business.

"How long before the old man gets back?"

"We just can't tell. He went out for supplies. If the snow holds off up high, he'll be back most any time." But Jake had hesitated in his answer, and the intruder stared sharply at his reply.

"Sure he went out only for supplies?" he shot at them.

"Oh, he probably had some other business, I suppose," Jim said.

"Sure he didn't go as far as Valdez?" the stranger persisted.

"He may go there, and he may not," Jim pointedly replied. "We don't have any strings on him."

"Now don't get huffy," the man soothed, with an ugly leer. "I'd kinda like to see old Bill and swap yarns with him again. If he's gone too long, I'll have to pull out before he gets back."

His hosts had nothing to say in reply, and they determined to make no opening for further conversation. Their only desire was to rid themselves of their unwelcome visitor as soon as possible. The man waited in vain for an opening.

Finally he came to the point. "I heard down in Knik that the old fellow has struck it rich at last! How about it?"

Jim hesitated and then told a white lie. "If he's struck it rich, we don't know anything about it."

After all, the boys, and not the old man, had really made the discovery.

Their visitor glared at him, but was still cautious in his approach. "Maybe there was nothing in the yarn—just another Yukon stove story." He considered for a moment, then, "But where has the old gopher been scratching this summer?"

"Just step outside and you can see three, four places where he's been digging." Jim was almost praying that the man would at least vacate the cabin.

"Sure, I seen those dumps already. But where was he operating last?"

"About a half-mile up the Smoky, on the other side of the creek," Jim answered, with a warning glance at his chum.

"Believe I'll take a look up there," the stranger proclaimed. "I'll be back for dinner."

Then away he went, stamping heavily from the cabin. His departure brought little joy to the boys, for they knew he would return in an evil mood. By noon they had prepared a good meal, hoping to soften their alarming guest. He was late. When he did arrive, his manner clearly showed his displeasure at what Laughlin's prospect had revealed. Yet during the meal he had little to say except to ask for food, and then still for more. His appetite, prodigious in itself, was whetted by his desire to see the boys jump at his bidding. The boys responded gladly, heaping food upon his plate, in an effort to reach his good nature. But when the man had wiped away the crumbs from his whiskers with his dirty paw, and once more lit his pipe, he began on them.

"You fellows sit and eat, and we'll have a chat. It's this way with me. I almost know Laughlin wouldn't go out this time of year and leave you here unless he meant to come back. And I'm darned certain he wouldn't spend the winter in this hole less he had something up his sleeve. If he does have something, I mean to cut on it!" The fellow hesitated, feeling that he had been too clear in the statement of his purpose. Then he whined, "Bill's such a good old scout, I'll gamble all I've got he wouldn't want to hog everything for himself." But his feelings overcame his judgment. "Anyway," he snarled, "I want my share, and I mean to have it. If I can't manage it one way, I will another! What say?"

Of course the boys said nothing. Argument might invite immediate disaster. The two were husky enough and each had plenty of courage. Yet, after all, they were but boys, and this was a full-grown man. With Jim still partly disabled, the odds against them were precarious. Even without the stimulus of argument, the villain was working himself into a passion which he still tried hard to keep in bounds.

"You needn't be afraid to talk," he cajoled.

Still they said nothing.

"Say, you two!" he then continued with hardening emphasis, as he rose and stood threateningly over them. "Are you fellows going to help me out in this, or not?"

"We've told you already that so far as we know, Bill hasn't made any strike. He'll be back soon, and you can ask him for yourself!" Jim was a

little malicious in this. "We're not lying to you. Why if we told you he had struck it rich, and then you went out and proved for yourself we had lied, you'd hold us responsible. Now, wouldn't you?"

"I most certainly would," he shouted, "and I mean to hold you responsible anyway! You kids just get ready for that!" He pondered for a time. Then, doubling up his fist, he gestured with it in unpleasant proximity to the boys' faces. "You listen here! I'll bet that old coot couldn't strike it rich without telling you kids all about it. Why, he'd brag about it first thing! He's a big bag of wind anyway. I'll stake my life he's in on something, and you know all about it. And I'm going to do this—I haven't looked over all the places that old rat has been digging, but I'm going to do it now. So listen! If I don't light on what I'm sure he's found, I'm coming back here to make you tell all you know. Get me?" Then he grabbed up his hat and rushed out.

The boys were frightened—badly frightened. Here they were, alone with a man who meant them harm. They could have evaded trouble by disappearing into the great woods, where they knew a hundred hiding-places. But they felt themselves to be guardians of the cabin as well as of the mine; and though scared, they no more thought of deserting their post than do soldiers on sentry. Consequently, their only way out was to plan some offset for the threatened attack. For some time they pondered the chances of delaying the issue until Bill had a chance to return, only to abandon that solution of the difficulty because they knew Simpson

meant business, and business of an immediate character.

Their unhappy conclusion was that they must fight fire with fire. Jim put the issue squarely in this fashion: "He's a big brute, and no end stronger than we. He's mean too, and won't stop short of murder to make us tell all we know. The only way I can see out of it is to get him before he gets us, and tie him up for Bill to deal with. Now, how can we do it? It'll probably be dark before he comes back. Can't we trap him then? Can't we jump him from behind?"

But Jake saw the fallacy in this plan. "I'd have to jump him alone. Your leg won't let you move fast enough to get in on it."

This, Jim reluctantly admitted, precisely fitted the facts in the case. But he went over and over the situation, estimating it with a soldier's thoroughness and skill. Eventually he hit upon a solution.

"You come with me, Jake," he said, and hobbled to the woodpile, where he carefully selected a solid stick something less than three feet long and about three inches in diameter. "There's your weapon!" he informed Jake. Then, picking up a somewhat lighter piece and saying, "This will do for mine," he limped to a block of wood for a seat, and rehearsed his scheme in detail for the other's benefit.

Jake was tremendously impressed and readily agreed to co-operate. But he had one objection, "Just suppose he won't come at us as you think he will?"

"Oh, but he will!" was the reassuring reply. "He'll hop back here just raving mad! And the

madder he gets, the more apt he will be to do exactly as I've figured out. He won't even consider the possibility of our doing anything to trip him up.

"And remember," he impressed the other, "I'm counting on you to lead off. If you do exactly as I tell you, there won't be a single hitch. I'd like to open the ball myself. But since I've done most of the talking, he'll start to devil me first. If he doesn't you just leave things to me. In any case, that tramp is going to see more stars than there are in the Milky Way!"

From that time on the conspirators kept a watchful eye against their enemy's early return. But Simpson did not appear, and at twilight the two piled into their bunks, which were of the standee type, one above the other. Jim took the top bunk, and Jake crawled into the lower. Very carefully, so that their weapons would not become entangled with the blankets, and yet be clear of the stranger's bleared vision, they deposited their heavy clubs behind them, ready for instant action.

They had been conversing in stealthy tones for an hour when Simpson was heard approaching. He stumbled over a log, and his growling curses made known that disappointment had added fuel to the fire of his anger. With malevolent face he strode into the cabin, well lighted by the electric lamps that Jim had installed for the old prospector's comfort.

"Now then!" the man shouted. "It's time for you fellows to come across! I've raked that hillside with a fine tooth comb. There's not a single colour anywhere! But I'm going to find Bill's gold, and

you fellows are going to help me find it. Willing or not, you're going to do that very thing! I've stood all the nonsense from two kids that I'll stand for. D'you hear me?"

He advanced threateningly towards the bunk where he supposed the boys were shaking in terror. He paid no attention to Jake in the lower bed, but instead concentrated all his fury upon Jim. The brute knew the boy was crippled, but Jim's physical condition made no appeal to him. Simpson wanted the gold, and he meant to get it. With a string of curses, he grasped the bunk rail and glared down at Jim. The crisis was at hand.

"Come across, I tell you! Out with it! Where is that discovery located? I'll count five, and if you don't open up before then, I'll make you wish you had never been born! I mean business right now!"

As Simpson stood there, his hands gripping the bunk, his ugly stomach with its filthy clothing protruded almost into Jake's face. Hesitating a moment, either to let his commands sink home, or perhaps a little reluctant to force matters to a definite issue, he let out another string of curses and then began to count.

"One!—two!—three!—fo——" But he never finished the "four".

Something happened. There was a tremendous explosion from his open mouth. "Wh-u-ush," he groaned and grunted all in one. Then he doubled over on Jim's bunk in agony. It was real agony. He was not acting a part.

For this is what happened. As the man stood before the bunk, Jake secured his gun and shifted to



the back of the bed. Gripping the weapon in both hands, he aimed it like a battering-ram at the man's greasy middle, and drew back for the lunge. At Simpson's "three" he "pulled the trigger", as he afterwards recounted to Bill. Hard and straight and true, the battering-ram, with Jake's tense muscles and weight behind it, hit the mark. A six-inch shell would not have been more effective. The impact of the club was hardly drowned by the man's groan of agony. Then, as Simpson slumped down to the bunk rail, Jim went into action. Raising his own club, he measured the old felt hat and swung viciously down upon it. "Crack," rang the club against hat and skull beneath. Down went Simpson like a bundle of old clothes, forgetful of his design against the boys, forgetful of everything that had ever happened to him. Instantly the boys were upon him. Around his legs went a rope; thrice about his arms, which had been snugly nestled behind his back, went the same rope. Knots strong and secure, were hurriedly but carefully tied. And there lay Mr. Simpson, out of the fight for keeps.

The boys stood back neither aghast nor bewildered by his condition. They even grinned at each other. Jim picked up their pail of water. "Sorry to wet our floor," he cried, "but this fellow needs a bath!" and into Simpson's face he dashed the cold liquid. Simpson shuddered, and began gasping for breath. How he did squirm and roll!

"Take it easy, take it easy, big boy!" called Jake as he dodged the rolling body. "You don't have to mop up all that water with your nice new clothes, you know!"

The man's struggles became even fiercer at the taunting words. His efforts brought his sore head into violent contact with a table leg, and then he stopped his ineffective battle against the ropes. But how he did beg!

"I was only fooling, boys," he whined. "Why, couldn't you take a joke? What do you mean by treating a poor old fellow like this?"

The boys only grinned in reply.

Next he changed his tactics and began to threaten. What would he not do to them when he should finally escape! These threats and abuse the boys stood as long as they could, and then Jim sternly said, "That's about enough now. You're up against it good and proper. And you're going to stay tied up until Bill gets back. I reckon you'll get yours then! What you've had from us will seem like a picnic when Bill gets through with you."

The man needed but little imagination to picture what Bill really would do to him. What he saw roused him once more to vehement action. The ropes held, and Jake raised his heavy club over the man's head. "Say, Jim," he called to his chum, "this club of mine will plug his dirty mouth! It's just the right calibre!"

At this threat, their victim once more subsided.

"He thinks he'll be good now," mocked Jake. "He says he's as harmless as Mary's little lamb. What'll we do now?"

"Go to bed and get a good night's rest," answered Jim, whose ankle did not seem to bother him at all. Doubtless in the excitement of their conquest, sore places had received just what they needed, vigorous

exercise, if not massaging. "Then in the morning we'll fix him up proper. But to-night he'll stay just as he is. He won't sleep much, and if he does, his dreams won't be too pleasant! Maybe we won't sleep much either," he added as an afterthought; "but anyway our beds will be easier than his."

Soon, after giving their late foe a drink of water, they piled into their bunks. Of course they slept fitfully through the night, and its hours were long. But morning came at last. Scarcely had they fed themselves and their prisoner (who was not fed first and who was surliness itself) and straightened up the cabin, when a long call came floating up the Smoky. "Hy-y, Jim! Hy-y, Jake!"

"Wow!" yelled Jake, "there's Bill back already."

Their prisoner groaned. Then he began to plead. "Don't let him kill me, boys! I never harmed you! I was only seeing if I could scare you!"

But the two boys went running to meet the prospector. "Hurry up and see what we caught last night!" Jim excitedly cried. And neither boy would explain what Jim meant until Bill entered the cabin to see Simpson in his bonds upon the floor.

"What are you doing here, Simpson?" There was an ugly ring in Bill's question. But Simpson only grovelled at his feet. "Out with it, boys. How did this happen?"

"He ran his tummy against that club in the corner!" cried the grinning Jake.

"And then he bumped his head against this club of mine!" proclaimed Jim.

CHAPTER II

OVER THE GLACIERS

"WHAT for?" queried the prospector.

The boys made no answer. They seemed to be studying in turn the man Simpson, who writhed at their feet, and Laughlin, who stood threateningly over him. Evidently their feelings had changed. Yesterday they had been both frightened and resentful, but the ease of their victory had made them forget what might have been their lot if they had lost. Peril, successfully passed, becomes only great adventure. In the rebound from the past night, their desire for vengeance or even adequate punishment for Simpson had passed away. As they took in Laughlin's hostility, they began to be apprehensive of what he might do to their humbled enemy, for they could see Bill's gnarled fists clenching and unclenching, and the savage little lights playing in his eyes.

Their studied silence was interrupted by the prospector's insistence.

"I've got to know what this fellow was trying to pull. He's a bad one. I've known him for years, and mighty little good in all that time have I heard about him. 'What devilry was he up to last night?'"

Jake fidgeted and turned uneasily to the other boy, for Jim was the natural leader and spokesman

for the pair. When Jim did speak, he was very deliberate in his reply.

"Well, he didn't actually do very much. He talked pretty savage and sort of tried to rough-house us. But we cured him of that when the show-down came. Nobody was hurt—I mean Jake and I weren't hurt—and I guess this fellow got all that was good for him."

"But did he try to hurt you?"

"Well, it sort of looked that way for a bit!"

"Now, see here, Jim. This man has a bad reputation. He couldn't have come here for any good purpose. He knew I wasn't at home. Just exactly what was he after—you must tell me."

Then reluctantly the boys related in a few words the story of yesterday's happenings. In the telling they were careful to omit the details of much of Simpson's aggressive offensiveness, but old Bill gathered much as they described their own spirited reactions. He knew that they had been in real danger, that Simpson would have carried out his threats.

When the tale was finished, Bill scowled even more savagely at the prostrate prisoner. He drew back his foot as if to kick the helpless man, but his own chivalrous nature restrained him from inflicting this indignity. Finally, with a scarcely audible "I want to think it over," he strode from the room.

Simpson was still terror-stricken. He knew Laughlin and the hard and ready justice of the frontier; he was convinced that Laughlin was only planning some adequate punishment to fit his case.

His own guilty conscience and evil nature prompted him to foresee most dreadful consequences for his uncalled-for attack. Before he could recover from his panic sufficiently to renew his pleadings for mercy, old Bill was back. In his hand he carried a heavy switch of birch.

Standing at arm's length from the prisoner, he began: "Simpson, I've never known you to be anything but a cowardly dirty skunk. I ought to put a bullet through your carcass not merely for this picking on two boys, but for other things you have pulled. But I don't want your blood on my head. So the only thing I can do to which you'll respond is to give you a good healthy licking, and you're going to get it right now! I ought to use my fists, but I'll not soil my hands by smashing you. Instead, you're going to have a mighty sore back to remind you to stay away from these parts!"

Bill raised his whip, and Simpson gave a scream even before the first blow fell. But his cry was unnecessary; he never felt the whip, for the boys with common purpose seized the old man's arm.

"Don't do that, Bill!" Jim cried. "You can't do that! Why, Bill, he's a grown man, and he can't stand it to be thrashed like a kid!"

The prospector struggled to free himself from their clinging resolute arms, but at last yielded, and threw the birch on the floor.

"All right," he said, "thank you. I'll let him off this once. But, Simpson, you listen to me! If it hadn't been for these boys, your ornery hide wouldn't hold water by this time! You're leaving pronto! And let me tell you something more—if

you ever so much as cross my path again, I'll get you on sight!"

He glared at the silent prisoner as if he still contemplated some sort of bodily chastisement, and then opened his big knife. Simpson once more began to writhe and whimper, for his foul imagination led him to suppose that he would be branded for life. Instead, the prospector bent down to cut the rope, and to unwind its length from the shaking body. Helping Simpson to his feet in no gentle manner, Bill went on:

"I'll let you off scot free this time. We'll give you enough food to take you out to Knik. But I mean to have an eye on you. You make Knik in three days, and you keep on going! You be out of there on the fourth day—I don't care where you head for, but you keep moving! I'll be in Knik pretty pronto myself, and if I learn you haven't done exactly as I've mapped out, you'd better say your prayers. You and I can't live in the same part of Alaska, and I mean to stay here. Now, you mush! I've half a notion to give you the mosquito cure on the way!"

Without even looking around, Simpson started shakingly for the door. To be threatened with the mosquito cure struck renewed terror to his soul. He had once seen a man who had been turned loose without even a shirt to his back to combat the swarms of mosquitoes that infest Alaska in the summer, and the memory of that poor creature's condition brought fresh life to his cramped limbs.

He had hardly cleared the doorway before Jim again pleaded for pity.

"Make him take his grub with him, Bill. He'll

starve to death on the trail if you don't! Don't let him start off like that!"

"You come back here, Simpson," snarled the old man. "You get your grub, and then thank these boys for saving you from—well, from several things."

Simpson obediently came crawling back, apparently feeling that something besides food might still be expected. While his provisions were being made into a bundle, he kept glancing from one to the other like a hunted wild beast, not aware from which corner to expect attack. Then, upon receiving the eatables, he again made off, muttering, as he turned away, a half-articulate "Much obliged."

Laughlin watched his figure rapidly grow dim down the shady aisles of the forest; and the farther Simpson receded, the better old Bill seemed pleased. Soon he began chuckling.

"Pretty high stepper, ain't he, boys? Well, he'd better keep hitting the high spots, and I suspect he will. The farther and faster he goes, the better I'll be satisfied. It's a good riddance to bad rubbish. But, oh my! I only wish I could have seen that big tub when Jake butted him in the belly!"

The boys joined in the old man's laughter, and for a while in lighter vein they rehearsed more particularly the situations of the previous day. Before long, the old prospector grew serious.

"It sure confirms my suspicions, boys, this fellow showing up the way he did. I ran across him my third day out, and passed the time of day with him. From that moment on, either he or something else kept me worried. I suspected that he might back-

track here, for I didn't like his looks, and he's always up to something sneaky. So when I reached Knik I simply couldn't go farther—I was worried too much over you fellows. I stayed just long enough to wire your dad, Jim, and gather up the few supplies we needed, and hurried back. It's lucky I had the hunch too."

Old Bill shrugged his shoulders as if to unburden himself of thoughts about what might have happened, and then went on:

"But we're still in the same fix we were before—not a single day nearer filing our claims. I reckon we better try the other scheme. I'm rather trustful now of you fellows making it through by yourselves. Jim seems to slip around pretty spry, and I don't believe that mushing will hurt him any. His leg may stiffen up a bit the first day out, but that's all. We'll give Simpson a day's start to get him out of the road, and to-morrow you can hit the trail. Ready to mush?"

"We couldn't be readier," eagerly responded Jim. "If we can't see this thing through after getting the best of old Simpson, something's wrong with us."

"Now, don't get puffed up over that," Bill advised him; "you may not be so lucky again. But we must hustle. I haven't told you that I found a letter from Mr. Conover at Knik enclosing money for your return trip. Seemed pretty anxious to have you both home too. But what the money will do is easy—following the trail on your own will be different. Maybe the best thing I can do is to draw a picture of the route for you, though there's no

chance of your getting lost if you just follow your nose!"

The old man hunted up a piece of brown wrapping paper, and on it pencilled a rough outline of the wilderness trail.

Pointing out various features on the map as he went on, the old prospector described the route.

"This cross is the cabin where we are now. We go down the Smoky to this point where the trail cuts to the left and right across this other valley. About twenty miles farther along, the trail forks near a big mountain, just about here. So far you can't make a mistake, for there are no crossings to bother with. And you can't get lost even after the trail forks, because both branches come together farther on. But remember this—the right-hand trail skirts the mountain and turns back again on the far side. That branch is always in fine shape, but the trouble is that it's much longer. This other shorter branch climbs the mountain and makes pretty stiff going part of the way. Besides, it leads over some glaciers. So you be sure to do this—if the weather looks bad, you take the longer trail. It'll pay in the end. But either way you go, you'll find that the trails come together right by this big muskeg.* Mosquitoes will be awful thick all along there, but you'll have your nets and gloves. Which reminds me—did Simpson have a veil or some mosquito dope?"

"Not that we know of."

"Well, that's his hard luck, but we won't waste our sympathy on him. He's had too much kindness

Swamp.

already. Anyway, you just follow that trail along the muskeg, and pretty soon you'll be in Knik. That's Knik right there. You can't be more than three nights on the road, and I won't worry over you out there as much as I did while you were alone in here. You're pretty good woodsmen for kids, and I'd be willing to bet that you could strike out across country, trail or no trail, and make it through in good shape. Once at Knik, you'll find a tug or some fish-boat going down to Seldovia, where you can catch the steamer. Now get busy. Sharpen an axe. Look over your veils and mend the holes. Pick out some extra clothes and good shoes. Here's some waterproof match-safes. Fill 'em up and stow them in different places. Fix up plenty of grub—a four-day supply. That's all you can tote and that's all you will need. While you're busy, I'll write to Conover all about our mine. Say, Jim, your dad will think the whole world centres in you! And yours will too, Jake, when they read that you fellows have snared a bigger fortune in your one season of prospecting than they have corralled with all their business deals up to date. Now, hop to it—I've got some mighty important details to put down on paper."

Thus dismissed, they hastened about their preparations. Into each pack went a change of underclothes and extra socks. With these were stowed a blanket and match-safe, a head-net and gloves. Some tea, a half-slab of bacon, mutton, sourdough bread, and some baked beans were tucked in to even up the loads. An axe, ground to keenest edge on their power-stone, was tied to Jim's pack. Jake

would carry the rifle. When two small lard-pails and a skillet had been added, they felt equipped for the trail. By the time all this was completed, Bill had laboriously finished his letter to Mr. Conover, and nothing remained but to wait till morning.

At six o'clock they were on their way, accompanied by the prospector through the lower gateway of the Smoky, and as far as the shoulder of the mountain where the trail began to head almost due south. Here Bill said "Good-bye."

"You see that hill way off yonder?" he questioned, pointing out a distant range. "That's where the trail divides. One keeps to the left, and the other almost doubles back. Remember what I said about watching the weather." He paused and his Adam's apple worked up and down above the collar of his old flannel shirt. "I—I—boys, I don't know what to say. You've been mighty good sports all summer, and I won't forget." Here the old fellow began to cough violently. "I—I well, I'll see you down in Seattle. So, on your way! Get the claims properly registered. I've told you exactly what to do. And don't lose those descriptions, whatever you do! They're the vital part of the whole business. Tell the clerk in the office who you are and about me, and he'll know what to do. So long—and good luck!"

Even though the old man seemed both mournful and worried at the parting, the boys themselves were not depressed. How could they be? Why, they were bound for adventure, on a three-day trail! Certainly life was good! And so, with kindly

thoughts about their old friend, they turned away with a mere shake of the hand, warmed to their work by the tramp down the Smoky.

Morning was still young. From adjacent cliffs rang clear calls from whistling marmots; camp robbers shrilled from the thickets; chickadees chorused their plaintive notes. Forest leaves were already feeling winter's approach, and their colourful array roused the boys' admiration. Nor were the packs too heavy—they scarcely noted the weight upon their backs. Yes, certainly life was good! On and on they tramped, following the trail as it swung from the mountain-side to cross the beautiful valley on its course to the distant peak. By noontime, swarms of mosquitoes necessitated the donning of nets, but even these cumbrous veils that shut out the air failed to dampen their spirits. Nor did Jim's ankle bother him until late in the afternoon, when they had neared the valley's rim.

At last they reached the fork of the trail, and both stopped by common impulse. Although the sun still rode above the western ridges and twilight would be long in this high latitude, their weariness was proof that they had come far enough for that day.

"What say, Jake?" was Jim's unnecessary question. "Shall we bed down here?"

"Elegant place to siwash," his companion replied. "There's plenty of wood and water, and brush for bedding. Let's split up—I'll make the wickiup, and you rustle some grub."

By way of answer, Jim immediately began gathering materials for the cook fire, and Jake set

to with the axe. On the creek's bank he picked out two saplings with convenient crotches. Through these forks he thrust a stiff pole, against which he leaned shorter pieces to support cedar boughs with which, tips down, he carefully thatched the whole. When he had finished, there stood the sleeping quarters, rainproof and windproof, a species of shed closed on three sides, but with the highest side open. Before this open end, Jake dropped a good-sized piece of hemlock for his backlog, and began to gather a supply of fuel against the evening's chill.

Meanwhile Jim had boiled tea in a tin bucket, and fried some bacon. Upon these with slices of cold mutton and sourdough bread they fed heartily. Afterwards they collected boughs for their bed. Across the boughs they spread their two blankets. All was ready for the night. For perhaps ten minutes they sat before the fire with its warm glow playing about them; but they were more fatigued than they realized, and soon the call to sleep was heard. Without a thought of their isolation they lay down to rest. Once during the night Jake rose to replenish the dying fire, but so profound were his slumbers that next morning only the depleted pile of fuel recalled his having risen during the dark hours.

The cries of the wild roused them when light had scarcely dawned. Hastily they washed and breakfasted. Packs were shouldered and comfortably adjusted. Then they threw at each other a questioning look. Which route should they take?

Jim as usual took the initiative.

"My ankle's a little stiff," he complained. Jake merely kicked at some bushes.

"Well?" Jim questioned. "Ever seen fine weather?"

"Never—let's get started," responded the other, and both boys headed up the left-hand trail. Only once did they turn to look back. By then they had reached sufficient height to see where the other trail had doubled back in reaching around the mountain.

"I'll bet this trail is not more than half as long," Jake asserted.

"Saving distance suits me to a T," said the other. Then once more they hastened forward.

Before long their path had led them into a canyon, and stiff, hard climbing began. Up and up they mounted, crossing rippling streams, and not a little impressed by the height of rugged cliffs that now walled in the canyon. Still, the going was not impossible, and soon rocky walls smoothed away to usher them into one of those mountain meadows of the upper regions that are so lovely in summer. The valley climbed steeply upward, and now above them they first glimpsed the collar glacier about which they had been warned by the prospector. By noon they had neared the edge of the ice-field. Across this ice the trail still led, with its course marked at intervals by brushwood which passing prospectors had thrust into the ice for guide-posts in times of deep snow. The air was sharply keen, and at this altitude mosquitoes were not troublesome. Soft snow afforded firm walking. Almost sooner than they believed possible, they had crossed

to the glacier's upper limit. Leaving the ice, the trail now curved about to a saddle between two small peaks. As they mounted this saddle, a panorama so glorious that it almost took away their breath burst upon them. In the distance lay the shining waters of Cook's Inlet. On every side rose peaks piled one above the other. Glittering hanging glaciers jewelled their upper slopes, and darkening black forests spread out below.

"What a world!" was Jim's exalted comment.

"You've said a mouthful!" answered his companion in less poetic strain.

They dropped over the saddle. Immediately below them spread the glacier which they must cross. They believed they could even distinguish where the trail swept away from the ice to meander along here and there in its plunge to the valley. They could make out the muskeg, too. And somewhere beyond, diminished by distance, so much that its dwellings were too indistinct for identification, lay their objective, the frontier hamlet of Knik.

"We'll be in by to-morrow night," was Jim's cheerful comment.

"Huh!" scornfully contradicted the other. "Doesn't look that far to me."

"Come on, then. It's a downhill haul all the way, and we can make time now."

Down they hurried on the rocky path, but hesitated at the glacier's edge. And well they might, for this area of the collar glacier was much wider than the section they had crossed earlier in the day. One could hardly say that it was a field of ice.

Rather was it a huge plain of snowy glitter, with scattered hummocks of the same hard whiteness that had been churned up by the grinding masses below. Its crevasses were not well defined, but the boys realized that the sloping evenness was cut up by fissures that reached down, down, none could say how far, to the frozen soil and rocks of the mountain-side.

But, threatening as it seemed, the glacier lay in their path, and had to be crossed. So on they plodded, noting that the snow seemed drier to their feet. It is a curious fact that many glaciers do not afford dangerous or even difficult walking while the sun is near its meridian; but when once its melting rays have begun their decline, the top snow gradually hardens to a crust, almost as treacherous as bare ice itself. Jake knew about this daily phenomenon of the summer-time, and hazarded the opinion that it was getting on in the afternoon. Jim wasted no breath for reply—his ankle was feeling the strain.

They had now reached a point where the trail began a great arc apparently for no reason at all. Older mountaineers would have understood the reason, but all that the boys could perceive was that this sweep of the trail made the way much longer for their lagging feet. That broad floor of snow inside the curve, with its gentle slope downward and to their left, looked more inviting than the trail, and seemed to promise as secure a footing. Added to its invitation was the urge of Jim's sore ankle.

"Let's cut across this bend, Jake," he therefore

proposed; the other, nothing loath, stepped off the trail.

Only feeling that they slipped more often on the hardening snow, the boys hurried on their course. When it happened, Jim chanced to be looking out across the snow and forests to what appeared like a small vessel coming up Knik arm. This interest slowed his pace somewhat, and Jake gained a little in advance. A low cry from Jake called Jim back to more immediate concerns. Seemingly Jake had sat down in the snow to rest. But even as Jim wondered at this, he noticed that Jake was in motion, that without any volition or help from himself he was sliding, ever so slowly, but nevertheless sliding, down the glacier slope. At first Jim was not alarmed for his comrade's safety; but a few moments' observation made it evident that Jake's body was gathering more momentum. Then Jim awoke to the other's peril: Jake could not control that downward glide—Jake was sliding towards destruction! The pull of gravity was inexorable—it would not loosen its deadly clutch—it was dragging Jake to his death.

And what a death! Jim's glance swept downward to where the other had already fixed his fascinated eyes. There, still some distance in advance, but directly across the path of Jake's sliding course, was one of the reasons why the trail on the ice made its great bend—a huge crevasse with icy open mouth yawned to receive its prey! A crevasse! With horror-struck imagination, Jim saw the unplumbed depths of the great crack, its glittering walls that pinched together in an unescapable trap

far below! He saw his friend already gliding over the edge with a final despairing clutch at the relentless ice, then the breathless fatal plunge into the abyss! The picture left him voiceless, motionless.

Now Jake roused to action. He threw himself upon his back, hoping that the added friction would check his downward swoop. Just for a moment he did seem to check his flight. The boy once more sat up. Instantly that terrible glide accelerated. Again Jake threw himself backwards, but this time without effect. The icy slope was not to be denied—it would claim its victim! Then it was that Jim, thrusting aside his horrified inaction, screamed, "Break the crust with your fists, Jake! Smash through the crust—use your hands—use your heels!"

Jake tried to do as he was bidden—as well try to break the pavement of a city street! His frantic efforts only lacerated his hands against the cruel crust. Soon he gave up and looked despairingly at the other.

"I tell you, use your heels, Jake, use your heels!" Jim screamed, and stamped the snow where he himself stood.

Jake, once more roused to hope, thrust downward again and again with his heels. Still that frozen snow beat off his attack! He glanced back at Jim as if beseeching him for other instructions. Jim was silent. And poor Jake, resigning himself to his fate, clasped his bleeding hands across his lap and set his mesmerized eyes on the gaping crevasse that was so relentlessly climbing towards

him. Once more he looked back, as if to sign an unuttered good-bye—he could not speak! Then again he turned downwards towards the crevasse so much nearer now. Jake had given up! He would die without further struggle, without one single word! But the silence of it all was shattered by Jim's shrill young voice.

"Grab your rifle, Jake! Use your rifle! Throw all your weight on the barrel! Shove it into the crust!"

His words galvanized Jake into action. New life and resolution were born. With hands that shook, yet steady enough to do their work, he reached back and loosened the rifle from his shoulder. Then, trailing it muzzle down, he threw all his weight upon the weapon. What hand and heel could not accomplish, the thin tough iron, borne down by his weight, brought about. Deeper and deeper into the crust bit the steel. Snowy particles and icy spray flew from the furrow that it ploughed. Then at last it held! Jake's fatal slide was stopped, stopped just in time, for almost at his feet yawned the crevasse, scarcely cheated of its kill. Jake was saved from its icy depths! Now the reaction came. He trembled violently; he made as though to stand up.

"Don't move, Jake!" screamed the other. "Don't you dare move! I'll chop my way down to you."

Then, step by step, the boy worked his way down to his companion, making sure footholds as he descended with the axe. Jake was still weak and shaking when Jim at last reached his side, and Jim was sweating more than even his vigorous exercise

could account for. Silently Jim reached out his hand to the other. Jake would not rise. Instead he pulled the other closer to his side.

"You saved my life, old fellow," he whispered, "and I'll not forget."

But Jim would have no heroics.

"Let's get back to the trail," was his only answer. "Me for the beaten trails, now and for evermore!"

CHAPTER III

ON THE RIM OF THE MUSKEG

THREATENED catastrophe upon the glacial slope had so affected the boys that their usual talkativeness upon the trail failed them. They could not force themselves to discuss Jake's recent peril—the incident with its awful possibilities still too deeply impressed them. Even Jim, usually so fertile with expedients, did not announce some other method by which Jake might have stayed his downward glide towards death. Nor did Jake himself refer to thoughts that were his while slipping towards the icy sepulchre. Instead, they silently hurried on to escape the further threat of the ice as soon as possible, closely scrutinizing the trail ahead, since they now understood why it zigzagged from point to point. They could at last comprehend that just as railroad or turnpike or even game trail followed the line of least resistance, so did the way across the ice turn here and there, to ensure safety for its followers.

Moreover, again and again they firmly resolved that never in the future would they trust to their own inexperience if they could have the experience of others to guide them. All in all, it was a wonder that Jake's narrow escape did not make wilderness cowards of them both. But some natures, through hard experience, gain a habit of caution without

losing their native boldness. To this class belonged the boys. Very soon they were once more to encounter formidable obstacles that would compel them to strike out a new course of their own. They would enter upon that path only because they were driven to it by sheer necessity. Although physical exercise gradually dissipated the after effects of the peril now past, they were reluctant to discuss any part of that happening, but turned instead to the object of their quest.

"Seems to me," said Jim, "we may have our hands pretty full before we get through with this business. We'll make it to Knik all O.K., but what then? Knik is only a little place, and you'll remember that the men we engaged to pack in our stuff to Smoky Valley were about all the people we saw on our way through. What if these men are all gone on a mush for somebody else? What will we do then? Or maybe there won't be a single boat going down the inlet to Seldovia. Won't that stump us? Still, we can't simply hang around Knik waiting for somebody to come to our rescue."

"That's what I have been wondering, too. This mush has the makings of a mighty difficult job. Remember how old Bill thought somebody might waylay him? If it bothered him, how about us?"

"Whatever happens," said Jim, "we've got to see it through."

"We sure have!" echoed Jake. "Know what I thought of back there on the ice? What I was worried most about? It was just this, 'I have gone back on old Bill! We'll never get the mine for

him! There'll be so much hubbub raised about my—my slip'”—he could not force himself to use the word “death”—“ ‘the secret of our find will be out, and they'll beat old Bill out of the gold!’ ”

“Well, I didn't think about Bill just then—I was too much occupied with you. But you're right! If we lose out, he loses out. Mark my words, though, we'll see this thing through—we won't lose out, and neither will Bill Laughlin. Now let's look the chances over. Just suppose we can't find anybody there to take us to Seldovia—suppose there isn't a boat in sight, what then?”

“Why, we'll make the mush overland, just as we're doing now.”

“Where's your geography, man? It simply can't be done. Look at this steamship folder I've brought along,” and Jim took from a convenient pocket that well-thumbed pamphlet. “See all that water? There's no use going down this side of the inlet, for you can't get across to Seldovia down below. Just look at the rivers we'd have to cross between here and there! And we can't mush round Turnagain Arm. That's simply out of the question. But there must be some way to make it in case we have to.”

Thus they rambled on, leaving the glacier behind them almost unnoted.

So engrossed did they become in their discussion that it was the warm air hovering over the lower reaches of the mountain in decided contrast to the ice-cooled breezes over the glacier that made them aware of how far they had really come. An hour later found them plunged into the lengthening

shadows of the hills, and they realized it was time to pitch their evening camp.

The routine of rearing a shelter and preparing their evening meal was hastily begun and as hastily completed, for fatigue, occasioned as much by the afternoon's excitement as by their long walk, bade them omit all unnecessary details. Then for a second time, still surrounded by that wilderness of ice, and mountain, and morass, they sank to rest. But all through the night Jake pitched and tossed: his subconscious self was reliving his hard adventure. Several times Jim soothed his companion back to tranquillity. But the night was so uneasy for them both that dawn, early as it came, found them with packs on back and eager for the trail. Soon their brisk steps brought them to the brink of the muskeg; by mid-morning they reached the junction of the trails. They agreed that if they could maintain the pace they would arrive in Knik by four o'clock.

Once more they began to bear due south, straight towards their objective. For the most part, their going followed level ground. They had paused to drink from a tiny stream when—what was that? The boys leaped to their feet to peer wildly right and left, forward and backward along the trail. Could some wild beast be following their steps, or stalking them on the flank? Instinctively Jim reached for the rifle on Jake's shoulder and Jake seized the axe. They must defend themselves where they stood! No tree of sufficient dimensions grew near to offer them a refuge. Again came that weird throaty moan! This time it sounded more

human than bestial. Yet in its quavering note there was still so much of the animal that the boys might have rushed panic-stricken from the spot if they had only known which way to flee. Once more the swamp gave forth that wailing, drawn-out cry. Now they knew it could issue only from a human throat. It sounded like a call for help. And when the gasping, sobbing cry once more broke the stillness, Jake hissed, "It's somebody in the swamp! Let's go see!" Without waiting for a reply, he leaped towards the muskeg.

But his friend, calmed by the established source of the cry, was less impetuous.

"Here, none of that stuff," he commanded. "Remember what Bill told us about muskegs? It would take no time at all to get lost in there! You might get into the mud over your head, too! Let's go at things right. Off with your pack,"—he had already dropped his own—"now then, you stay right here on the trail. I'll work my way back to whoever it is. Every time I yell, you answer me, so I won't get too far from the trail. And don't you move from this spot, whatever you do!"

Slowly and carefully Jim stepped off into the muskeg. The footing proved very treacherous. It was a sea of mud and slime, with little mounds of grass—the niggerheads—alone affording secure footing. Wild cranberries grew in profusion from these niggerheads. Sometimes he could scarcely find room for his feet. He soon reached a spot where he saw unmistakable signs that a heavy object had left its imprint in the mud—it resembled the furrow that a log, if dragged by main strength

through the swamp, would leave. Following this trail, he hopped along, his breath coming in gasps from his leaps across the threatening mire.

For some moments no cry had been heard, but then the swamp again echoed to that despairing cry, so startling the boy that he stepped backward into the mud, that immediately engulfed him almost to his hips. Still he was not frightened, but only startled by the horrible cry. Bounding forward upon the niggerheads, he soon stood above a thing that was human without doubt but, literally and in appearance, a feebly struggling mound of mud. The creature had its arms wrapped about its face—that is, where the face ought to be. Jim bent down for a closer look, but no features could be distinguished. They were only indicated, that and nothing more.

With a command to Jake, "Keep yelling all the time. I'm coming out," he started back for the trail.

Soon he was at Jake's side.

"It's a man," he panted. "He's in dreadful shape; the mosquitoes are eating him alive! We've got to get him out."

"But how will we do it?"

"I can go straight to him. When I reach him, I'll call. You take the axe when I tell you I've reached him, and blaze your way straight to us."

Once more he started off through the swamp, and a few moments later found where the poor fellow lay. Millions of mosquitoes were buzzing round. While he called to his companion, the lad broke off a bit of brush to swish the swarms away. He might

as well have tried to dam Niagara with a handful of sand. Two mosquitoes seemed to live where one had died!

In another minute Jake reached his side. First stopping to wipe away some of the mud from the man's face, they tried next to half carry, half drag him along the route blazed by Jake. It was impossible—they could find no common footing from which to unite their efforts. This they soon realized, to their despair; but a possible solution was soon proposed by resourceful Jim.

"Let's make a travois out of brush," was his proposal.

So with the axe they lopped down two of the larger bushes that grew thickly about. Quickly they trimmed off the branches near the butt and intertwined the tops. Upon these matted tops they finally succeeded in rolling the helpless man; then, by carefully watching their footholds, they wormed their way back to the trail by degrees, dragging the travois behind them over the slippery grass and mud.

The little bucket was utilized to bring water from the near-by brook, and the man's face was cleansed from its slimy mask. What a face was revealed! It was scarcely recognizable as human. Across its forehead was a bloody welt—he must have slipped in the muskeg and struck his head against some heavy root or larger bush. And his eyes—the eyelids were puffed out from the mosquitoes' poisonous sting until the socket was even with the cheek. Or it would have been if the cheek and forehead themselves had not been so terribly inflamed.

The nostrils were well-nigh closed. The ears were a shapeless mass. The neck where it had not been protected was swollen to impossible proportions.

Even so, there was something strangely familiar about the outlines of that face. Suddenly Jake exclaimed, "Jim! Jim! I think it's Simpson!"

Jim in turn studied that shapeless visage.

"You certainly made a good guess! It is Simpson sure enough. He must have tried to save time by cutting across the muskeg and fell against something. Well, he can't do us any harm for awhile, and that's some consolation."

In Jim's words were no signs of pity, but the lads were as tender and careful in their ministrations to their late enemy as if he had been their dearest friend. With a damp handkerchief, they cleansed the man's mouth—the mosquitoes had even invaded that—his ears, his nostrils. One of their head-nets was adjusted about his face. But what further could they do? Certainly, they could not carry him to Knik. All they could think of by way of restoratives was some hot tea. A fire was there-upon quickly built; a pail of water hung above its flames. Without waiting for the water to boil, some tea was stirred in, and as soon as the water was discoloured a little of the brew was coaxed down Simpson's throat. The drink was chokingly swallowed, but there was no further response. And had not two Siwash suddenly appeared upon the trail, the situation would have been quite beyond them.

"Hey, you fellows, hurry up here!" commanded Jim, beckoning vigorously to the Indians.

The Siwash came, but without hurry—they were too lifeless for rapid movement.

"See this man?" Jake burst out. "Know what to do?"

"Sure ting! me, Alexandervitch, know heaps! Me skeekum smart!" was the big Indian's rejoinder.

Then methodically the Siwash proceeded to make Simpson more comfortable. A bed of boughs was heaped up and covered with both the Indians' greasy blankets. Into their folds Simpson's body was rolled. Next a fire was built to windward of the bed; green leaves added to the fire created a smudge that soon drove away the mosquitoes.

By then the Siwash had finished except to exclaim, "You go Knik! Get help! Me and squaw stay!"

His words made Jim look keenly at the other Indian. Then he stifled a surprised grin. That other was actually a woman and not a man!

This enlightenment as to the smaller Indian's sex did not affect Jake. Without even noticing her at all, he shouldered his pack and started down the trail. When the astonished Jim still lingered open-mouthed by the Indian couple, he called back, "Let's be on our way. Grab your pack and come on!"

With a parting cry, "We'll make time," Jim caught up with his friend, and then both boys ran forward on their search for help.

Without further incident, but almost ready to drop from their violent exertion, they reached Knik late in the afternoon and went at once to the so-called "Roadhouse" where they had spent a single

night two months before. Only one man, the landlord, was about the place. To him they quickly related the tale of Simpson's plight and where he might be found. The man was urged to speed, but he needed no urging, for he had encountered such wilderness situations before. Merely answering that he would at once send a rescue party from the Indian village, he started off. In but a few moments he returned to say that four Siwash were on the trail with an improvised litter to bring Simpson in.

For the boys the incident was now closed. Strange as it may seem, their thoughts dwelt more upon the saving of Simpson than they did upon Jake's escape from the ice.

All in all, it had been two days of undreamed-of adventure.

CHAPTER IV

NEW ENEMIES APPEAR

SINCE their discovery of Golden Glacier, a gradual change in the boys' attitude manifested itself. At first they had been merely elated at finding the great mother lode for which others had so long and so unsuccessfully sought. Although theirs was the thrill of the discoverer, they were not selfishly concerned with the promised value of the ledge; for, as rich men's sons, they had never suffered the sting and smart of poverty. On the other hand, their interest in the find had been vastly stimulated by Laughlin's joy upon receiving a third share in the mine, because that very joy revealed to them how great were his apprehensions of a wretched old age.

The circumstance that really set fire to their regard for the gold was Pete Simpson's attack upon them. This was a very personal matter, and it made clear that they had an essential part in preserving their common property. Next, when actual responsibility for filing the claims was entrusted to them, they entered into an even more vital relationship. Finally, the hard mushing of the last three days, with its adventure upon the ice and their discovery of the unfortunate Simpson, made them more than ever determined that their friend should be spared such hardships as these in his old age.

For these reasons, their errand to the land office amounted to more than a mere trip that promised to satisfy a thirst for adventure. Rather had it become the means of fulfilling a sacred trust, and they were committed to see the matter through, whatever the cost. A wilderness with its vast stretches of forest and muskeg; mountains with their bewildering canyons and threatening summits; even the perilous waters of the north Pacific would not now daunt them in carrying the matter through. They knew also that the human factor must be considered. Just as there were dangers from Nature to defy their onward course, just so there might also be designing men who would seek to wrest their secret, and with it the gold, from their possession. Of such characters old Bill had warned them, and the man Simpson had been a type. What they had encountered in the last few days might eventually prove only a foretaste of things in store for them.

It was in full consciousness, therefore, of dangers lying before them that they strolled along the beach that first morning after arriving in Knik. They had not seen Simpson, who had been brought in during the night, but they were assured that he was a very sick man; further than this they had not inquired about him. They banished him from consideration except as he typified threats to the success of their mission. What did concern them was their host's statement that there were no means in sight by which they might reach Seldovia. His conjecture was that within the next ten days or so a boat might make a round-trip passage from that port.

But he had no certain knowledge—it might be a week, it might be three.

Since the boys were so set upon their errand's being accomplished before this time was up, only one course remained open to them—they must make the journey alone. Brought face to face with that necessity, they were somewhat shocked by thoughts of the open sea, but they were not terrified. For added to their own native resolution and initiative was the fact that they had already traversed this stretch of waters on their trip from Seldovia. Nothing had occurred at that time to cause particular apprehension of danger now. But of course there was this difference—then they had been in the care of trained men who knew exactly how to navigate these uncertain waters. Boy-like, the two friends believed they had absorbed more helpful information than they actually had.

Hard upon this conversation with their host, they had once more resorted to the map. The scale showed that the distance to Seldovia was approximately two hundred miles, which under ordinary conditions is not a long voyage for even a small boat. But the conditions which the sailor must face on these waters complicate matters. First of all, the tides must be considered.

Now, as a usual thing, tides are almost a casual phenomenon that worries nobody. But Cook's Inlet is shaped like a huge funnel with the funnel mouth towards the open sea. This peculiar shape has two effects upon the tides. As this water mass comes rolling up the inlet, driven by relentless pressure outside the capes, the water—being more

and more restricted by the gradually narrowing basin of the inlet—mounts higher and higher, until at the upper end of the inlet there is an extreme rise of thirty-four feet. As this huge mass of water is piled up, a mighty current is generated, since the water seeks an escape by rolling onward—water seeks its level, as we say—and the speed of this current may, in the narrower stretches of the inlet, exceed that of the ordinary power-boat. Then once more when the Pacific tide has passed by the outer capes there is a rush of water down the inlet towards the sea. Twice each day these currents, each in opposite direction to the one preceding it, sweep along the inlet. The result is that marine activities in these regions are controlled by the rise and fall of the tides.

Moreover, the far-reaching tide flats, that are fully and deeply covered at high water, are again laid bare at low tide. Woe be it to the little vessel that, caught over these flats on an ebb tide, comes to rest on these muddy wastes. For with the change of tides, a strong wind usually sets in, whipping the rising waters into waves that engulf the stranded craft before there is sufficient depth to float her off the mud.

Added to these peculiarities of the inlet are the so-called tide rips. They are caused by strong winds that blow opposite the flow of the tide. If, having partly filled a bathtub with water, you splash the water at either end of the tub into waves, and then watch what happens when these two sets of waves meet in the centre of the tub, you will get a realistic illustration of what is meant by tide rips.

Just as the waves in the tub on meeting each other coalesce to become much higher and narrower from crest to crest, so it is on the inlet; the pressure of the contrary wind on the bosom of the tide results in waves that are very much shorter between crests, but also very much higher. There is also an excessive accompaniment of spray and spume that is whipped from the wave by the wind. Even though excellently handled, an undecked boat may rapidly fill in such a sea, for the waves are so short that they leap upon the boat before its buoyancy can lift it above the sweep of the water.

These were the outstanding hazards that the boys would face, but they had not yet sufficient acquaintance with them to be greatly disturbed. On their voyage in, as we have said, experienced men who knew the vagaries of the inlet and conformed to its requirements had been in charge. No heavy winds had been encountered. Between tides, the crew had simply laid over in a secure place waiting for the tide to change in their favour. For this reason no memories of past dangers disturbed the boys' confidence in the outcome of their intended venture. As a matter of course, they plotted out their route and were eager to start. They intended to make their first anchorage in the lee of Fire Island, which was but a short distance down the coast, yet a long enough run to make them acquainted with their craft. The next stopping place would be in Kenai River or somewhere near the point of that name. From Kenai, if conditions were favourable, they believed they could make Seldovia on a single tide. They calculated, of

course, on the possibility of foul weather, but they were confident that by sailing from headland to headland they could always reach the coast before the fury of any storm could cause them damage.

The first thing needed was a suitable boat, and they sought one on the beach among the craft that lay there beyond the reach of high tide. Among the motley collection they soon discovered an eighteen-foot dory powered with what Jim at once pronounced a first-rate engine in appearance and make. At a venture he reckoned, by comparison with the boat that had brought them up the inlet, that this dory could sail seven or eight miles an hour in still water. Helped on by the push of the tides, ten miles were quite possible on the average. So here was a very simple problem—two hundred miles to Seldovia, at ten miles an hour, required only twenty hours of actual sailing; and they would distribute the sailing periods over three days. To be safe, they would carry a week's provisions and petrol for five hundred miles. A plentiful supply of water could also be stowed away. It looked so easy—how could they fail?

To be sure, the boys felt that old Bill would not have approved the undertaking. Moreover, they were disturbed when they considered the objections their parents would have raised had they but known of the risky venture. But both Bill and the parents were miles away, and any other deterring factors that the boys could conceive were far outweighed by their determination to file those claims. There was one obstacle still, the landlord. He might consider it his plain duty to object.

It was therefore with very innocent faces that they approached their host to arrange the purchase of the dory. To their delight, he at once declared his ownership of the craft and also a desire to sell. The transfer of title was soon effected, but their subsequent purchase of plentiful supplies and bedding in his little store at once roused his curiosity. Upon hearing of the intended voyage, he immediately inquired who their companion would be, for he could not believe that the boys purposed to make the trip alone. The supplies had been paid for, and a loitering Siwash had been despatched to put the purchases on board and fill the water-casks, before they finally admitted the facts in the case. The landlord at once began to advance the dangers involved, but the boys were resolute. Jake informed him of Jim's familiarity with petrol engines and machinery in general, and outlined the trip for him. Eventually the landlord granted that they would probably come through safely; and as a mark of his interest presented them with a small compass. The boys had not thought of that need. What if a sudden fog should envelop them!

At the dinner hour their apprehension of encountering men of Simpson's type was confirmed. For while they were eating, two hard-bitten mushers of the same appearance as their late enemy entered and sat down at their table. Jim detected one of the pair winking at his companion and nudging him as if to say, "These are the fellows."

The strangers conversed in an undertone, but did not address the boys until Jim started to push back his chair from the table. Then the smaller man,

looking directly at Jim, loudly said, "We've heard that you fellows have been with Bill Laughlin all summer. What's there to this story about his striking it rich?"

Since Jim felt they would soon be beyond reach, he was not very diplomatic in replying, "Mr. Laughlin is not so very far away. Suppose you hunt him up and ask him all about it."

"Well, I'll be d—d! Say, young fellow, can't you answer a civil question without climbing your high horse? What's eating you, anyway?"

"I mean just what I said. I don't care to discuss my friend's business with strangers. And you're pretty much of a stranger to me!"

"Of all the sassy kids I've ever seen, you take the cake!" roared the man. "Some day mighty soon you'll be wishing you weren't quite so flip!"

"Aw, dry up!" his friend ordered him without ceremony. Then, turning to the boys, he quietly explained, "We heard up the trail that two young men from outside had been with Bill all summer, and we concluded you two might be the ones. My partner here meant no offence. We both know old Bill, and we're mighty glad if an old musher like Bill has made his pile. The good God knows he certainly can use it. You've had a mighty fine vacation with him, I'll bet."

Jim was quite taken in by this smooth speech and he instantly changed his attitude.

"We surely did enjoy our vacation with old Bill," he replied. "He's the best scout ever."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. None could think more highly of Bill Laughlin than we do."

And now the man warmed to his real object. "You'll have a nice trip down the coast too. I suppose you'll be looking over every town where your ship docks. That's the way I always do. When one has friends up here that can't go outside for the winter, we fellows that can leave always have lots of errands for the men who stay behind. I reckon you haven't been up here long enough to meet many people who would ask you for favours. Still, I recollect that when old Bill couldn't go to Valdez, he asked me to do some paper work for him once upon a time. I certainly was glad to oblige him, too.

"I suppose, you'll be doing the same thing for him too, if he's anything like he used to be. The old fellow always has some spot that he wants to prove up on, and I bet this summer is no exception. Now, isn't that correct?"

Jim was somewhat deceived by the stranger's approach to this forbidden ground and answered thoughtlessly, "You're partly right." But then he caught himself—he had almost told what the errand was! To cover up his error he lamely added, "In fact there are several things he asked us to do for him. At the first stop we make, we have to go ashore for him."

"That's fine," shortly said the stranger as he left the table. But he had got from Jim just the information he wanted. And Jim realized the man was perfectly aware now that either he or Jake had the precious locations in his pocket.

The boy was annoyed with himself and he grew angrier when Jake, to signify that he had caught

the other's slip, stepped on his foot under the table. But he quickly recovered his usual poise, for he knew nothing could unsay what had been said, and he found additional comfort in believing that these men had been already convinced that the boys were on their way to file the claims. All that could be done now was to make all the speed possible to Valdez.

Since speed was the immediate object, nothing could be gained by postponing their start. If Jim could have decently done so, he would have hustled Jake to the boat and cast off at once. But he wished first to thank his host for the help given them, and therefore sought him out. Before he could express his thanks, the landlord beckoned the boys into his own private quarters and shut the door. Then, hardly above a whisper, he declared:

"Watch out for those two fellows. They're regular toughs and old pals of Simpson. I don't understand why you fellows are in such a terrible hurry, and I don't care to know. But those fellows seem mighty interested in your doings, judging from their questions. My advice to you is, keep your distance! Some black things are charged up to their account, and they'd try to get away with anything! I'll get a check-up on you as soon as I can, and if I find anything has happened to you on your way out, well—they'll never bother anybody else! Now get moving before they discover which is your boat. They might begin by putting it out of business. Good-bye, and hurry back!"

This certainly was a pretty kettle of fish! Even before they could get started, danger was already

in the offing. And they had two hundred miles of ocean to span before either the majesty of the law or friendly arms could protect them! So with only a muttered, "Thanks—we'll show them some speed," the boys hastened to their boat.

Jake at once sprang to the painter, and Jim bent over the engine. But when he turned the flywheel over, the engine merely sputtered and 'coughed. The noise quickly drew a number of Siwash towards the beach, and with them came the two white men. To be more exact, the whites did not come with the Indians, but rather outstripped them in the rush towards the beach. Before they could reach the dock, they began calling, "Hi there—wait a minute—we want to see you."

But Jim kept grinding away at the engine, and Jake, with unusual caution, first cast off the line that tied them to the dock and poled the craft a little way out, where he held her with the pike. They would not be boarded against their will, at any rate. Doubtless the men would have prevented this movement had they arrived a moment sooner, for they certainly seemed annoyed that they had so neatly been given the slip, at least for the present. The coarser ruffian of the two started to swear; but the other, making a desperate effort to maintain his former suavity, bade him be still. Then with a smile that he tried hard to make friendly, he inquired:

"Going down the coast already, boys? Wouldn't mind taking my partner and me along, would you? We'll share fifty-fifty in the expense."

"Sorry," said Jim. "We're pretty well loaded already."

New Enemies Appear

65

"We'll make it worth your while if you will. It's mighty important that we make Kenai as soon as we can."

"Nothing stirring," firmly replied Jim, who had now got the engine to take hold. "We're off." And the boat headed out into the stream.

The man instantly forgot his urbanity. All the villain in him mounted to the surface, but he spoke only loud enough for the boys to hear.

"You little rats," he grated, "you'll never see Valdez nor Seattle either! We know what you have in your pocket, and we'll have it off you before you're a week older. No brats can hand it to us like this!"

By way of answer, Jake derisively waved at the furious pair and drew in reply a shaking fist.

"They can't worry me now," said Jim, more to bolster up his courage than to give expression to it, for he certainly felt weak about the stomach. "They can't catch up with us now. There's nothing but a little outboard kicker on the beach. If we can't outfoot it two to one, it'll be mighty strange."

Jake picked up the twenty-two and threw open its breach.

"Where's those shells, Jim? Only let them get close enough, and I'll fill 'em full of holes."

"We'll be so far down the bay by the time they get started, they'll never sight us again," asserted Jim, "so put away that gun where it won't get wet."

It did seem that his expectations would be borne out, for their craft, driven by the magnificent little engine and helped on by the rushing tide, fairly ate up the miles. Once beyond the first point, they

forgot what lay behind them, only the waters of the inlet engrossed their attention. Ten miles further on their way they spied a big school of white whales flashing by a short distance off. The orcas appeared white silhouettes in shape, now rising, now disappearing beneath the calm water. Sea-ducks skittered all about them. Curious sea-parrots with ugly, vari-coloured heads flopped lazily out of the boat's course. An occasional hair seal thrust himself shoulder-high out of the sea to stare at them with fishy eyes, and then noiselessly sank back into the depths.

"Wish we had time to get one," grieved Jake. But he did not even point the rifle at these inviting targets.

Soon the passage between Fire Island and the nearer mainland opened up, but Jim still kept the boat's nose pointing towards the south end of the tree-covered island. So rapid was their pace that long before sundown they were almost abeam the point, and could make out the high ramparts of Kenai Peninsula, which that great navigator, James Cook, had christened Point Possession.

In the middle distance lay the entrance to Turnagain Arm, up which Captain Cook once thought he might find a safe passage into another ocean. Although the mouth of the arm is customarily whipped into choppy seas by winds that blow off the glaciers, it was now calm as the inlet itself, and the boys stared longingly across to the massive promontory, in their eagerness to put all possible distance between them and the danger that threatened from Knik. They wondered whether it

would not be well to make the crossing when conditions of wind and tide were so propitious. But knowing that the tide would hold only long enough for them to reach that distant shore, and the anchorage there being uncertain, they decided to carry out their original purpose to abide at Fire Island for the night.

They were able to lay their boat in very close to shore. The little schooling they had enjoyed on the previous trip made them careful about grounding the craft as the tide continued to ebb.

Once the hum of the engine died away, their thoughts naturally harked back to their would-be passengers.

"We'll stay here till morning," said Jim, "but what if those fellows make it down here against the tide? We'd be in a mess where we are."

"I've been thinking the same thing myself," replied the other. "We'll have to mount guard, and sleep one at a time."

"You're only partly right," answered the farther-seeing Jim. "If they can see us as quickly as we see them, what then? They'd be moving and we'd be here with a dead engine. It would be cold, and I might not get it started in time to run away from them. It's better to do this. Let's go ashore and cook some grub. After that we can paddle beyond that little point. It's calm close in, I feel sure. If they make this anchorage to-night, they'll remain here for the same tide we're waiting for. If we anchor just beyond the point we can see them and they can't see us. When they settle down we can paddle out of hearing without making any noise.

Before they wake up to what's doing, we'll have the engine going and be miles on our way. How's that for a plan?"

Jake seldom disagreed with his chum, and this time he signified his assent by forcing the boat still nearer shore. When he had reached wading depth, he leaped out with arms full of catables,, but had to make a return trip for the cooking utensils and the axe.

"You watch out she doesn't go aground, Jim, and I'll rustle the grub," he bade the other..

Then, walking inland where the smoke would be lost among the hemlocks, he built a small cook fire. Such was the skill acquired in his summer's training, that in half an hour he was back to the boat with bacon and eggs and tea and warmed-up beans. He returned to quench the fire with seawater and then the boys sat at ease in the boat to eat.

Between mouthfuls they discussed their situation and prospects, but such is the exhilaration engendered by warm food that neither evinced any uneasiness. Still, this confidence did not deter them from moving the boat beyond the point, where it was well screened by rushes, as soon as they had finished eating. The tide was still gently on the ebb; but ere long it ceased to ripple against their boat.

"I don't see how we can get trapped in here," was Jake's opinion. "They would have to come right to this very spot to see us; and by all that's right they'll anchor back there where we ate."

"We're taking some chance wherever we are, but this certainly is the safest place we can find. Once

we're on our way, if this old engine keeps turning over, I don't believe there's anything back at Knik that can overhaul us. But we dare not let them surprise us."

By now the sun had dropped quite below the hills, and they proceeded to make up a bed between the seats. They drew straws for the first watch, and Jake won. With a triumphant grin at his companion he said, "Call me early, mother dear," and that was all from him.

Three hours later he was roused, and Jim crawled beneath the warm blankets. Nothing had happened. It was dark and a decided chill hung over the water. The tide had changed and their little ark had of course swung with it and was now gently tugging at its anchor, pointed towards the open sea. It seemed to Jim that he had scarcely closed his eyes, when he was given a violent jerk by the other.

"Sh!" Jake whispered. "Listen close."

But there was no need to listen closely. From up the inlet sounded the steady "put-put put" of a smoothly running engine that clearly announced the approach of a power craft, and that a good one.

"Maybe it's not those fellows—perhaps it's someone else," Jake whispered.

"Don't fool yourself on that," Jim hoarsely whispered in return. "Nobody would be bucking this tide unless they were in a desperate hurry to get somewhere. Who else could it be? They're the only people back there that would be coming down this way. We're in for it now! Where's that gun?

If they should happen to jump us, it won't do to be caught napping!"

Both boys were now really frightened. They believed that danger was closing in, and they felt the loneliness of their situation. Their alarm increased when Jim observed that if he knew anything at all about engines, he was pretty certain from the sound of the engine's exhaust that the approaching craft was at least their equal in speed. Evidently back there in Knik they had not seen all the engines the town boasted. Still, there was nothing to do but await developments. It was too late to flee.

The "put-put-put" now swelled into a louder roar in the calm night air—their enemy was drawing near.

CHAPTER V

BATTLING THE RIPS

As the hostile craft panted nearer, fighting valiantly against the tide, the boys cowered down in their boat, as if thus they would elude detection. Not the slightest whisper escaped their lips, and they shrank nearer together for mutual comfort as they sought further concealment behind the low gunwale of the dory.

Running along in the shadow of Fire Island, the pursuer had not yet come into sight, and the boys strained their eyes in vain, seeking to pierce the blackness that blotted out their enemies. Though still unseen, it seemed to them that the hostile craft might run them down, so near did its throbbing engine sound. After what appeared ages of suspense, the moon came from behind a cloud, and they saw it riding abeam the sandspit off which the boys were lying. Still on it roared; it passed the place where the boys had first anchored; it held directly for the reed bed in which their dory lay. Jake was almost ready to scream from the tension of his nerves before the beat of the engine slowed to a pace barely able to hold the craft against the tide. And when it came to rest, so near was the boat that conversation on board was clearly audible.

"Well, here we are, and we must have guessed wrong—they've crossed to the other side. I'm for

stopping. There's no sense in burning gas against this tide. We'd be all night making Possession, and I'm dead-beat right now. We might as well drop back into that bight and spend the night."

"If I was sure they made the crossing, we'd cross too. But they may still be behind us. Those kids are smart, and we've got to watch out for tricks. I reckon they have an idea we're on their trail, and they'll likely hug the land so as to make a getaway if we show up. It would be just like them to go sneaking along the shore all the way down to Seldovia. Humph! Much good it will do them, for from here on we'll do the same thing." This was in the voice of the man who had almost trapped Jim into a confession of their errand that afternoon.

"You're crazy, Crawford. If we do that, we'll never catch up with them. They may be heading right down the inlet, tide or no tide."

"Who's running this outfit, Watkins, you or me? We'll do just as I say. And I say we'll follow the shore. That's why I was so tickled when old Dirty Neck showed up before we left Knik. I told him to head straight for Kachemak Bay as soon as he could get started, and if he didn't see anything there, to make for Seward. If we don't pick up the kids along the shore, he'll be holding out his loving arms for them farther down the line. And you can just gamble on our searching the shore as we go along."

"All right, Sammfy, all right, just as you say. But I'm dog-tired, and if we're not crossing the arm, let's drop back where we won't have to worry over anything. Curse those kids, anyway! I owe 'em

something already and I'll owe 'em still more when we catch them."

"The kid did sort of bear down on you, didn't he, Watkins?" sneered the other. "All I want out of him is Laughlin's locations. You can hand him what he needs and I won't object. Just be sure to make a good job of it, that's all I care."

"He'll never sass another decent musher——"
The boat with its evil crew had begun to drop back with the tide, and not another word could the boys hear. But they had already heard enough and more than enough. They now understood that if they escaped the villains that pursued them, but failed to make all speed possible down the inlet, this other party, Dirty Neck—what a name—would be lying in wait for them farther on their way. No wonder the boys felt very much alone!

The men dropped anchor some three hundred yards up the island, and the boys could dimly discern the boat as a shadow on the water. One of the men evidently lit his pipe when they had come to rest, for there was a short flash of light. Then it seemed that figures rose in the boat to wrap themselves against the cold night air. After that, all that could be seen was a blur on the water.

The boys understood, of course, that any talking by themselves could not be overheard, but they were too depressed for conversation. Nor did they dare to sleep. All they could do was to wait until the men had lost themselves in heavy slumber. Soon they themselves ached with the cold, and when Jim began drawing a blanket towards him, the blanket's movement drew a startled gasp from

Jake, so wrought up were his nerves. But Jim merely handed over another blanket, and then, holding up a finger and pointing down the inlet, he said, "We'll move in an hour." Gradually their fright died away. Such is the reaction of youth that Jim began to chuckle when he imagined he foresaw how far they would be on their way when their pursuers woke up.

"Never fear, old boy, we'll surprise them yet," he said with a grin, "and if this Dirty Neck gets in our way—why, we'll wash his neck for him." .

Jake responded to the other's rising spirits and grinned back as he replied, "Then he'll have still another reason for meeting us—I bet he needs a bath all over!"

When the boys felt that their enemies were sound asleep, Jake inch by inch hauled up the anchor, while Jim laboured at the oars to keep the craft from floating backward with the tide. But not a sound was made even when Jake, having stowed the anchor, took up a paddle to help propel the dory onward. Thus working together, they headed towards the distant headland and edged their way out of the reeds. The tide was now running strongly and the boys would never have made any headway at all had their hiding-place been elsewhere than it was.

As it fortunately happened, they were following a ridge along the sea bottom that formed a dividing line between Turnagain Arm and the inlet proper. The result was an area of slack water by which the boys profited. But when still within short rifle-shot of their hiding-place conditions changed—the tide

tripped them with all its tremendous power. Quickly they realized that they were being swept up the arm almost as fast as their engine could have driven them. But nothing could be done—in fact, nothing needed to be done, for what the boys most desired was distance from their pursuers, so that they might set their engine to work as soon as its violent explosions were beyond their enemies' earshot.

"Thank the Lord, the tide didn't hustle us back towards Knik when it picked us up back there," said Jim fervently.

But the tide that they regarded as their friend did almost betray them, for suddenly they brought up with a violent jar—they had struck bottom! Almost as suddenly, the boat tore loose from its muddy contact. But that jar made them aware that the treacherous current was hurrying them along in the lee of Fire Island and over a tide flat. They must get off this flat no matter what other consequences might be entailed—and at once. Jim glanced back towards the sandspit—surely, he thought, the engine's exhaust would not be audible that far away. But the risk had to be taken, for they might run aground again, and there, hung up on the mud, their boat might quickly fill.

Jim primed the engine and turned her over. To his delight, she caught at the first revolution of the flywheel. Quickly he let in the clutch and began once more to head for Point Possession.

"What a little beauty!" exultingly thought Jake. "She's the best ever!"

Yesterday afternoon he had believed that the

engine could never have run better, but the engine's response then was nothing compared with its keenness now. The boat, responding to the drive of the screw, seemed almost to leap over the swirling water.

The boys steadily watched towards their enemies, fearing that the staccato song of their engine might rouse them from their sleep. This steady staring revealed no movements about the point, but it did make the boys aware of something else—although the boat continued its seeming rush through the water, they were making no progress towards the point. The tide was too much for the engine—this explained it all. But they could do nothing except to continue their fight against the current, and while they watched with sinking hearts their slow progress, they grew increasingly fearful that their pursuers must be wakened into action. Their enemies finally must have heard, for the boys soon saw a blot on the water, emerging from the reeds. Their enemies were aroused at last! They were coming to investigate. And they had the tide behind them.

"Look's like we're done for," Jim muttered in his comrade's ear.

"Oh, Jim, you said we could run circles round their boat. Give her more gas!" Jake gasped in a panic.

"Keep your shirt on and be sensible. Can't you see we're bucking the tide? If we can only get out into the inlet before they wake up to the fact that this is our boat, and have them astern, we'll have a fair chance. But if they open up and run down here to see who is making all this fuss, we'll be a

gone goose, for they'll do three feet to our one, with this tide behind them."

Evidently the crew of the other boat decided to investigate, for the water began to fly from their bow. But Jim was not caught asleep. With a violent jerk he brought the tiller round and headed straight up the arm. The manoeuvre cost him but little distance and its effect was instantly apparent. A space of two hundred yards now separated the racing boats, and the pursuers were unable to close the gap. But they shouted no orders to halt—at least none could be heard—they simply crouched down in their boat to reduce wind resistance and settled themselves for the chase. Then, without warning of any kind, Jim's engine missed a beat or two.

"Take the tiller, Jake," he instantly commanded.

Jake sprang to the tiller and Jim bent over the engine. Quickly he ran over the ignition, seeking for loose connections, but all was as it should be. Whatever had caused the miss had evidently righted itself. But Jim still hovered over the machinery and bade his steersman hold the craft pointed a trifle more towards the right-hand shore.

Soon fear gave way to excitement. If any ordinary race is thrilling, a race for life is more thrilling still, and this the boys had good reason to believe was a race for their own lives. They could hear nothing but the noise of their own motor—the other craft appeared to move in perfect silence. So far as they could observe, the race was yet a dead heat. The craft behind could not be shaken off and there she hung directly astern. On the other hand, the boys did not lose an inch of their lead, and this

advantage gave them added confidence. Thus mile after mile was passed with scarcely a word spoken by either.

Even by the dim light of the moon, tossing waters could be seen ahead, and suddenly there came a bump against the bow of their speeding boat. Other bumps, increasingly violent, followed the first at irregular intervals. The boys could not fail to see that they were now drawing into a narrower part of the inlet and that a sea was picking up.

"It's getting rough," said Jim, "and that may help. I still think we have the better boat, even though she isn't faster. Anyway, that outboard motor of theirs will have a hard time of it in this spray."

"You're wrong, Jim," answered the other boy; "they're coming up on us." And such did seem the case—the other boat was closing the gap. But the real cause of its momentary advantage lay in the fact that their own boat had struck rough water before the other reached it. It was the pursuer's turn to lag when they had gone but little farther.

"Just as I thought," Jim cried gleefully, now restored to himself as immediate danger again seemed to pass. "The rougher it gets, the better for us, and the worse for them. I hope she'll blow a gale!"

It did seem that Jim's wish would be gratified, for the sea was becoming decidedly rough. There were no high-rolling billows such as a heavy wind generates; instead, the waves simply seemed to jump up and down. The boat instantly responded to this choppiness. It shook from bow to stern,

for the propeller being at one moment deep in the sea and the next moment clear, pressure was removed from the propeller blades, and the engine then raced as though it would fly to pieces. The air was filled with spray. Solid sheets of water hurtled by on either hand. Water sloshed about the boys' feet as the boat steadily filled. They might be swamped at any moment if the boat fell off before the pound of the seas. But Jim continued driving his engine to the limit—time to ease up when the other craft had been entirely distanced.

Their pursuer was without doubt steadily losing ground. Dawn was beginning to break, and she could easily be seen as she pitched and tossed astern. Either the men had grown fearful of their craft's ability to ride the gale, and slowed down purposely, or they were having engine trouble. While the boys watched intently, a burst of flame shot upward from the other boat. They could not conceive what that distant flash signified. Then ensued another and still another flash. The boys were still perplexed. All they could discern was that a man seemed to be standing almost erect in the other boat, and they partly guessed at this. The next flash was parallel to the sea—and then still another. Instantly upon this flash a splinter flew from the sternpost alongside Jake.

"The murderers," he gasped; "they're trying to shoot us."

But no more shots were fired. Evidently the men had thought they might frighten the boys into halting their pace; then, growing exasperated when no attention was paid to their random shots and

they saw themselves still being outdistanced, they had fired directly at the fleeing boat.

The boys had now more serious things to worry about. Water was coming aboard in bucketfuls, and Jim was forced to leave his engine to bail with both hands. Supplies were tumbling all about the boat. The bedding had torn loose from its protecting tarpaulin, and had it not been for its soggy condition, would have blown overboard. Both boys were dripping wet. If they opened their mouths to shout encouragement to each other, a cloud of foaming water would almost smother them. Nevertheless, Jake did manage to speak. "Let's run for the shore, Jim," he gasped. "We're filling in spite of all you can do!"

"You hold her just as she is, dead into these waves," Jim yelled above the whistle of the wind and the slap of the waves. "If you let her catch one on the beam, you'll never see shore. Ease her off just a little towards that island whenever you get the chance. Maybe we can find shelter there."

Then with one hand he sought to make the bedding fast and with the other to keep on bailing. How long they fought the wind and waves they could not say afterwards. For hours it seemed to them that Jim nursed the engine and rammed bedding under the thwarts all at the same time, while Jake hung like grim death to the tiller. But presently they drew nearer the little island and believed themselves fairly secure.

"So those are what they call tide rips," reflected Jim aloud. "I've heard lots about them, but I had no idea of what they were really like. I know

enough about them now. Once is enough for me. I got so scared back there, I felt like surrendering and having it over with. Why, those waves didn't roll—they simply romped up and down! And how that wind did spill their crests! You did a mighty fine job of steering, old fellow. If you had let her get in the trough even once—well, by now nobody could have stolen our papers. They'd have been at the bottom for keeps, and we along with them. But they didn't reach the bottom, and we're going through with them—I feel it in my bones."

"I sort of weakened back there when I saw one old monster that looked big enough to bury us out of sight," Jake confessed without shame at all. "Well, we're out of it now, and we'd better make land. I'm about frozen. I'll run round the island to see what things are like if it's not too rough to make the turns. Maybe we can find a good safe place to anchor."

The wind no longer blew with extreme violence, and they had drawn well out of the narrows by the time they rounded the island. Then gingerly Jake steered the dory down upon the turtle-shaped bit of land, for the tide was still running strong. At the island's upper end a perfect little basin with no disturbing current was disclosed. After Jake had manoeuvred the dory into this tiny harbour, Jim thrust the pike down its full length into the water, but found no bottom.

"It's simply made to order," he said. "We can anchor within a step of the shore."

"You can't land any too quickly for me," answered the other through chattering teeth; "I'm 'most frozen right now."

"A rousing fire will soon fix that—provided those fellows don't come coasting down upon us. We ought to shove off the moment they show up back there. So before we land, I want to look over the engine and dry her off. You dig out some petrol—this tank must be about empty."

Jim found some dry waste in the tool-box, and proceeded to wipe off the engine. Then, as Jake wormed his way forward, Jim sounded the tank and, just as he expected, found it was practically empty. What if the petrol had failed during the hours of tempest! Then once more Jim worked over the engine.

Meanwhile, Jake delved through the sopping bedding that had, with the supplies, been originally stowed away up forward. Thinking only of his own misery, he had dug quite to the bottom, and was groping around in the slimy water, before it dawned on him that he had not found the petrol. Half dazed, he again went through the wet cargo as if he believed that a five-gallon can could be hidden behind a package of tea. Then, with a despairing groan, he squatted down in the bilge.

"Jim," he gasped, "there isn't any petrol!"

"Wh-wh-what's that you say? No more petrol?" shouted Jim.

"Not a single drop! That Siwash must have forgotten to put it on board."

"Then we're done for! There isn't even a pint in the tank. And look over there—it must be all of three miles to the mainland! What if those fellows are on their way?"

CHAPTER VI

SAVED BY THE BORE

THEIR journey had begun so auspiciously and they had triumphed so completely over difficulties that the boys had come to believe that their troubles would soon be over. Now they were plunged into the depths by a sudden change in outlook occasioned by their oversight when checking the Siwash as he stowed their baggage. Hitherto their problems had been serious enough, yet always a way out had been quickly discovered. This time seemingly there was no way out—indeed, the seriousness of their predicament would have appalled the heart of a frontiersman mature in years and experience. No wonder the boys breathed hard. Everything had apparently gone smash. Had they come to the end of the trail?

For twenty-five miles they had triumphantly sailed up Turnagain Arm only to be stranded on this lonely little isle. Farther up the arm were two small towns, Hope and Sunrise by name, of which the boys knew nothing at all. And even if they had known of their existence, it would have been quite impossible, or at least foolhardy, to venture on such a sea trip in a heavy dory for which they had only two oars as motive power. The same conditions threatened their return to Fire Island. In addition, between them and escape by withdrawing

down the arm were two relentless enemies, hot upon their track.

It was with the doings of these two men, Watkins and Crawford, that they were most deeply and immediately concerned. They had shown themselves so determined in pursuit that the boys knew only a disabled engine had prevented the men overtaking them and working their will upon them. At any moment now, or at least as soon as the tide was favourable, these hardened pursuers might appear. Down deep in their hearts, the boys realized that any struggle they might put up in defence of themselves and the papers would doubtless prove ineffective. It appeared that all they could do was to wait for the final stroke.

No wonder Jake sank wretchedly into the salty bilge-water and Jim stared back at him from eyes that saw most clearly their approaching fate. They did not need to imagine any menaces to their security—they had seen so much of the brutal will of Watkins and Crawford that they sensed the dreadfulness of their position rather than thought about it. For a long time they squatted there in silent wretchedness of body and mind alike. But finally Jim's ears caught the chattering of his friend's teeth and he saw how the other was shaking from the cold and wet. Spurred by Jake's distress, he forced himself to jump up.

"Things will work out, old fellow!" he cried. "Anyway, it won't do to give in. Something's bound to turn up—it always has. What we need first is the good fire you spoke of. Let's get warm and dry, then maybe we can find some way out of

this mess. Get a hustle on—while there's life, there's hope, you know!"

Then he leaped ashore with the painter in his hand. Jake followed. There was an abundance of firewood all about, and almost sooner than one could believe possible, a roaring fire warmed the boys' damp clothing to a steaming heat. When they became comfortable, their empty stomachs commanded attention, and the boys piled into the boat for the abundant supplies they had purchased in Knik.

Things were worse than they had anticipated—what had once been well-chosen provisions was now only a soggy mess washing about. Their bread had been converted into stringy dough. Their beans, that best of all human food for the trail, delicious and appetizing to the hungry man, were submerged in the bilge or sticking to the ribs of the boat. Their tea-container had held together fairly well, but the tea itself was soaked. Except for the bacon and half-a-dozen eggs still unbroken, nothing had resisted the sea-water. But the famished boys proceeded to do their best with the sickening mess. They gathered up as many of the beans as they could and cleansed them with their drinking-water. The bacon was scraped clean of the silt and slime. The remains of the bread were propped up before their fire and dried. Then generous slices of bacon were fried to a crisp, and into the grease that had been fried out, the rock-like pieces of dough were dipped and afterwards fried. Their eggs they saved for a later meal, but some of the beans were warmed up. Of course the tea could still be used. In fact,

everything tasted good, so hungry were they, except for the strong, salty seasoning of their fried dough. Indeed, their hunger was such excellent sauce that the boys were startled by the inroad that this one meal made upon the slender store they had rescued. With one accord they began to grope about the dory for something that might have escaped their previous search, but nothing more could they salvage. And they saw, unless they could find some means to replenish their larder, that they would very soon go hungry.

With this probability they would not concern themselves at present. They were warm. They were fed. Their most pressing need now was shelter. The fire was built up until it fairly roared in the breeze that blew down the arm, and about it the blankets were spread to dry. A lean-to for the coming night was next erected. When this was finished, having nothing more to distract them, they abandoned themselves to contemplation of their predicament. Many were the searching glances cast down the arm, and great was their relief when no sign of their pursuers could be seen. Gradually, as the foe failed to make his appearance, a little old-time confidence returned, and eventually they settled down to plan a way out of their difficulty.

"We might just as well face the music from beginning to end," Jim slowly began their council of war. "If those two fellows want to land, all we can do is try to bluff them with the twenty-two. I don't believe we can bluff them—they want those papers too bad. If they find us here, they'll get us, sure as

fate! But they'll have a fight I bet they'll remember! On the other hand, just suppose their engine has really gone bad enough so they can't reach here for another day or so. In that case things will be different. By that time we ought to be over on the mainland. Once safe on shore, we'll stand a chance. I know we can make our way overland down Kenai Peninsula. Fact is, I'm so sure we can do it, I'm almost tempted to start right now. But we'd never make the shore—just look at that current! We'd be swept down the tide so fast and far, they'd be spared the trouble of coming up here after us! Tomorrow noon is the earliest we can start—but we'll start then with a rush."

"I'm with you all the way," Jake pluckily answered. "But man alive, there isn't a settlement that I know of between here and Seward."

"Don't give up before you start!" Jim shot back. "What others have done, we can do! We've got some grub, and some ammunition, and an axe; and our foot-power is still working. Look here at this map the roadhouse man gave us. I figure we're just about here. Right over there is Seward. Running back up this way is an old railroad I've heard Dad tell about." He was pointing out these locations on the map while speaking. "What we'll have to do is to make that railroad. There won't be any trains, for it's been abandoned for some time, but once we hit the right of way, we'll be safe and it'll be plain sailing into town. Notice how these mountain chains run. It looks as if we'd have to do some climbing, but we're good for that and more too. See that big lake and the river running through it.

We'll have to head that stream, for she looks pretty bad to me. But all the other streams look like creeks that we can cross one way or another. No, I'm not afraid of the water. But I'll tell you what I am afraid of. Just suppose we should take to following up some valley that ends in a canyon, and the canyon should prove a blind lead?"

"I'll bite—what do you mean by that?"

"Why, we might get stopped by a cliff that went straight up or a precipice that went straight down! In that case we'd have to double back a good long stretch and look for a way round. We might not make it then!"

But Jake was so enthusiastic that he would admit no such possibility.

"Huh! Give us the grub to keep going, and we can keep on doubling back all the rest of this summer. That doesn't look like a very big country, and there's just bound to be some way through! Why, we'll be regular trail-blazers! Old Daniel Boone will have nothing on us. I wish we could start right now!"

"You haven't anything on me there," Jim answered emphatically. "I'm willing to admit I'm scared of those men, even though I'm not of those mountains. Once safe over there on the mainland, I'll lay off our course and then we'll stick to our compass. We'll have to angle back and forth, but we'll keep going in that one general direction, and by checking up on our landmarks, we can't go wrong. The thing to do now is to choose what to take along—we'll have to travel light."

"Not much of a problem in that," Jake quickly

asserted. "All we've got is some grub—there's little enough of that, and our bedding."

"That's the point! We can't take all our blankets. It will be just mush, mush, mush, every hour of the day. Every pound that we take must count. We can't take more than two blankets. There'll be the rifle and the axe. All the food we have is the bacon and the tea. We can't carry the eggs, so we'll fry them for breakfast. We'll want the skillet and a pail. We'll need our veils and gloves and some extra socks. But we can't take any other clothing. That'll make less than fifteen pounds for each of us. I think we should make a good distance each day, even with that load."

"I'll say we can, and we'll keep to a steady average, uphull and down."

Jake, more easily depressed, was likewise more easily enthused. He failed to realize what steady climbing can do to tired muscles and what a drag an empty stomach can be. Then, too, mountains that look so easy in the distance become simply enormous when one has to make one's own trail up their rough sides; and rivers which are unspanned by bridges present vexatious problems that always mean delay.

"Whatever we do will be done to-morrow, not to-night. We'd better go take a last look down the arm again. If there's nothing in sight, we'll put out our fire and turn in for a good big sleep."

Away from the fire, the air was chilly, to unpleasantness, but they saw nothing on the water to dispirit them. Still hopeful of the morrow, they returned to the blaze to shake the silt from their

now dry blankets and to spread them in the lean-to. Then, having stood for a few moments in silence to gather in the last rays of heat from their dying fire, they carefully extinguished it, lest its light might betray their whereabouts while they slept, and plunged with a shiver between their warm blankets for the night.

Their slumbers were not disturbed, and with the crack of day the boys were up and about. Bacon and eggs and tea with the toasted remnants of their sourdough bread made them ample breakfast. All they then had to do was to wait. It was tedious waiting, broken only by their selection and re-selection of the blankets they meant to take with them through the mountains, and the stowing of their duffel in the boat. Their skillet and one pail were also given a very careful cleansing and the axe was whetted with a stone which served that purpose admirably. All the while they kept a wary eye down the arm, but no vessel's approach either caused alarm or gave them cheer.

"A few hours more," said Jim, "and we'll be on our way. Over there we won't be so much on edge. Seems funny to me, when I look at those big mountains that may be filled with heaven knows what, I'm not a bit scared, but I am afraid of what I can't see here on the water. I reckon I must be a landsman and not a sailor! After we make this mush, I reckon Dad will trust us anywhere on land."

Their fire was kept comfortably blazing, for they knew Crawford and Watkins would not pass the island without investigating it, and they meant to be comfortable while they had the chance. Had it

not been for the uncertainty of their enemies' whereabouts, they would have been decidedly at their ease. But as they lay in a blanket with their feet stretched out towards the flames, they could not keep their minds away from what might be hidden by the distant point. Occasionally they wandered to the island's lower extremity, as if that nearer station might sooner and more clearly reveal an approaching foe. The tide was now running strongly up the arm, and the boys knew such a current would bring their foe down upon them, if they were to come that day. At last they did see something—out beyond the far headland a boat made its appearance, as yet too distant to reveal its identity, but fraught with possibilities of danger. Jake was first to descrie its approach.

"Oh, Jim, look there! I can see them coming now!"

Even at that distance, a boat could be plainly seen as it moved out of the shadows or rather the background of the cape. At first she seemed to approach very slowly. But soon, as the distance decreased, she came on more rapidly, thrust by her propeller and the tide. Not many minutes passed before the boys could see the little craft actually pitching and tossing as she combated the rips. She was making bad weather of it, but never faltered on her nearing way. Friend or foe, she rushed down upon them so rapidly that soon no doubt of her identity was left—this was the boat manned by Watkins and his comrade in crime.

Jim had already climbed to a higher part of the island, and he now called to Jake, "Bring that gun."

up here in the bushes. We've got to stand them off. They've seen our fire from the first and know we're here."

Jake leaped up the hill with the weapon in his hand.

"Lie low, old boy, until they're in fair range," he urged. "You're not sure they have seen us yet. Don't try anything till you're real certain we're discovered."

Probably Jake was a trifle timorous, but his advice was good.

The two had not long to wait. Crushing and smashing its way through the rips, the boat held steadily on for the island. But so rough was the sea, with still more tumultuous waters to be crossed, that the boys still had hope.

"Maybe they can't make it through those last rips," cried Jake. "That's where we had such a time yesterday!"

Disaster to the boat and its occupants may have been Jake's sincerest wish; but doubtless he only hoped that the boat, becoming unmanageable in the rips, would be hustled by the island on the rushing tide. If this was his wish, it seemed quite possible of fulfilment, for in the midst of that maelstrom the motor must have failed. At least the craft began to slew round in the troughs, but almost as quickly one of the men straightened her out, head to the seas, with his oars, and the other bent over the engine. Then once more she headed towards the boys, who had risen to their feet in anticipation of coming tragedy. Thus their exact location was revealed to the men, one of whom pointed his arm

towards them. In answer, Jim brandished his rifle as a warning not to land. But the men were not to be bluffed. Instantly the man who had dropped his oars grabbed up his rifle and fired. Smack! went the bullet into one of the stunted trees. Ping! snarled a second shot just to their right. Simultaneously the boys dropped to the ground and crawled off to one side, as another bullet tore up the earth and stones too close for comfort.

"Jim, Jim! they mean business—they aim to kill us sure!" groaned Jake.

But his companion paid no heed; for a rushing, grinding noise that blotted out the boy's voice, and the whipping of branches in the gale, and the trampling of waves on the island's strand, seemed now to fill all the reaches of the arm. What could it be? It wasn't wind—for bushes bent no more than they had. It wasn't earthquake—for the ground was steady beneath their feet. And the sound was increasing—its source was nearing them—it was coming up the arm! Peering through the leaves, they saw a great wall of water rushing towards them. It stretched from shore to shore, one long, unbroken, curling wave with spume and spray whipping from its crest. Now it was making more noise than an avalanche—it appeared irresistible in its might. Apparently some great dam down the arm had given way and a pent-up flood was escaping in one tremendous gush of water. And that is what practically had happened. No restraining masonry or mounds of earth upreared by man had held back old ocean's tide from its furious advance, but the mighty pressure of the glacial gales upon

the plane of the sea and the increasing constriction of the narrowing rocky sides of Turnagain had together dammed back the onward surge from the Pacific. For hours the raging tide had been held in check. Higher and higher it had mounted. And then at last, in one tremendous bound, it broke the pressure of the wind and the pull of the shore, to come crashing up the arm. Thus the bore, dreaded alike in the Bay of Fundy and Turnagain Arm, comes into being. It was the charging advance of this bore that the boys now watched in awe and wonder.

Out in the boat one of the men must have heard that roar, for he stood up to look back down the arm. Evidently he called the other's attention to what was coming, for his companion likewise rose so as to see above the boiling rips. As they watched, always that wave, huge, threatening, bellowing, was hurling itself towards them. But apparently they concluded they could make the island with ease and find security there, for they settled down upon the thwarts. Once again the boys saw the rifleman aim his piece and fire. The men would land no matter what the boys might do to prevent them. In fact, the boat had to land. Safer, far safer, to face two boys, no matter what their weapons, than to be overtaken by that devouring wave.

Jake and Jim again despaired. The hostile boat was scarcely two hundred yards above and less than that off the island. The rips were almost passed by now. That hostile craft would beat the bore—the men would land in a few moments—a breath or two and the boys would be struggling for life!

At that instant the engine must again have cut out. One of the men bent to his oars, the other could be seen struggling with the motor. It coughed out a jet of smoke. Again he laboured over the engine—his comrade rowed more furiously. This time not even smoke came from the engine! And all the time that ravenous wave was plunging nearer. What a fury of sound it was making! The whole bed of the arm seemed to fill with nothing but echoes of violence!

The boys stood up in their excitement. They sensed that mere man would not seek another's life with an avenger so closely dogging his own steps. And there was so much of awful menace and power in the charge of the bore, the boys felt the men's doom was certain.

Watkins and Crawford must have felt it too. They now crouched in their vessel, clinging to its seats as if that would save them. But what was a cockleshell of a boat to such a monster! The bore fairly howled in gleeful triumph as it rushed upon them. For hours it had been held back by opposing winds—for hours it had been harassed by constricting shores. But it had won its way through—it had triumphed over the gale—it had climbed high enough to thrust its way through narrowed channels. It roared, bull-like, in its exultant conquest of all resistance.

Two hundred yards between boat and wave became one hundred—yards became feet. Gripped by horror, the boys watched it swoop over the last space between its foaming front and their enemies. Then it struck! The power boat never rose to

climb over that rolling, foaming parapet. That wall of water was too steep for such a feeble effort. And when the bore struck, not even a dent was made in its hard wall. The boat was simply engulfed. It merely disappeared. Where once had been a boat with two human beings aboard was now simply raging, racing sea. Still horror-struck, the boys ran to the water's edge as the wave passed by. Not an oar, not a box, not a sign of their enemies' having been so close to them could they see. And the only sound was the bellow of the bore as it continued its mad rush up the arm. ·

When silence fell again, the boys faced each other in solemn awe. They were shaking like leaves at what they had witnessed. They realized that their own lives had probably been spared only through the appearance of the bore, but their horror over their enemies' doom made them oblivious for the time being to what their own fate might have been.

At last Jim spoke, "I'm glad I didn't have to shoot."

"God did the business for us that time!" Jake answered with equal solemnity.

CHAPTER VII

INTO THE WILDERNESS

THE destruction of two men in their strength presents at best an appalling sight. And for a considerable time the boys were almost stupefied by what they had witnessed, even though Watkins and Crawford had been their enemies.

Jake was the first to rally. He strove to recover his poise by attending to the few necessary preparations that had to be accomplished before they should embark for the mainland. Picking up the blanket that had been spread before the fire, he folded and refolded it before depositing it in the dory. With the greatest care he rearranged the cargo that had already been stowed away. Then he returned and stirred up the fire. But Jim did not move from the spot where he stood silently staring at the waste of waters as if he might even yet glimpse some trace of the boat or its occupants. More thoughtful and less easily stirred than Jake, his deeper nature could not so quickly throw off its fit of gloom. It was not until Jake loudly reminded him that their enemies were gone for good and he could accomplish nothing by maintaining his watch across the water that Jim gave any sign of the other's activity.

Then he said, "Sure, they're gone. And now what it means to us. We wouldn't have been safe a

minute with them on our heels. But I'd rather have taken a chance on their landing here than watch them meet an end like that. They might have spared our lives if we'd given up the paper."

"Well, no matter what they might have done, they're out of the picture for keeps—there's nothing surer than that. You'd better save your sympathy for ourselves. I think we're going to need it."

Jake's words sounded heartless but they were just what Jim needed. With a sigh and a straightening of his shoulders, he left his vigil to join his friend.

"I suppose we'll head for that point over yonder?" Jake then asked, pointing to the nearest part of the shore, just opposite the island.

"It looks like our best bet," Jim answered. "I want to get away from these waters just as quickly as we can. It may be farther than we think, and we ought to take advantage of everything that comes our way. That spit must reach over here close on half a mile. That means so much less to row and so much less danger of getting caught by the tide if anything goes wrong. I think I'd rather walk ten miles than ride this arm a hundred yards farther than I have to."

"You're talking for both of us when you say that!" said Jake with much emphasis. "Besides, look at that saddle in the mountains just back of the spit. It looks to me as if some sort of canyon must lead up towards it. That's another good reason why we should land there."

"I hope you're right. If you are, we'll have some luck from the very start. That saddle may mean

that beyond the first ridge we'll strike a valley running in the direction we must go. At least climbing will be easier, and that's not to be sneezed at."

As the boys continued their discussion of the possible routes, the tide was gradually slowing down. With the approach of high tide, the wind also lost its force. It was almost time to start, for the boys estimated that their journey might be of two hours' duration; if so, to secure themselves against being swept down the arm on the ebb, they should start before extreme high water. So once more they inspected the articles they would carry in their packs.

"Here, Jake, this will never do!" Jim cried excitedly. "We're starting in wrong. Those matches mustn't go into the packs. They might work out and get lost. You take half of them and I'll take the rest. We must always carry them in our pockets. And let's make this an unbreakable rule—every time we make a fire, let's put them back in our pockets before we do a single other thing. It's better to be safe than to be sorry."

"You're dead right, Jim. We've got little enough as it is. Without fire, we'd certainly be up against it."

The boys entered the dory, and Jake picked up the oars.

"You pull the hook. I'll row," he offered.

"You'll get all the rowing you want without being in such a hurry," Jim answered. "Let's see if our kicker will still work. We had a little gas left and we might as well burn that up. It may save

us close to a mile of pulling," Having carefully inspected the wiring, he opened the throttle and spun the flywheel half-a-dozen times to prime the cylinders. When he threw in the switch and swung on the flywheel, perhaps to his own surprise, the engine caught with a roar.

"Up with that anchor!" he ordered in the voice of a bully mate; "we're off!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" answered Jake in the same strain, and hand over hand he reeled in the slimy rope.

When the hook swung clear of the mud, Jim carefully backed his craft from its mooring place in the basin, and headed out to sea.

"Seems as if everything breaks right for us sooner or later," said Jake as he took the tiller. "I'm beginning to believe in our luck."

"Our luck's all right, of course. But there's lots of luck that happens when people do their best. We're trying to do that, you know, not only for our own sake but for old Bill's sake as well. If God helps those that help themselves, He surely ought to do something for us when we're trying to help such a pard as Bill."

"You're dead right, as usual," the other agreed. "Bill Laughlin is the grandest old fellow I ever met. He was mighty nice back there in Smoky Hollow, and as long as we're in this mess, it helps to know what sort of a chap we're doing this for. There isn't anything big enough or hard enough to stop us now. I'd mush my head off for——"

"You'll have a chance to prove your words right now," chuckled Jim as the engine gave one last

chug and died. "We're out of gas—there's no use examining the tank—she's plumb empty. Since you're so willing, just bend to those oars."

As Jake, nothing loath, thrust the oars into their locks, Jim interrupted him by saying, "Oh, of course you're willing, but don't work harder than necessary. Let's unship this tiller so it won't drag against your pull. I've thrown out the clutch so the screw won't be so bad. But at that I'll bet that you will be thinking you're pulling a ten-ton craft before you've rowed half a mile."

"If I do, I won't make a fuss about it," Jake grimly answered. "Besides, your chance is coming next."

The tiller was unhooked and stowed amidships, and Jake began to row. Why, rowing was not such hard work—or so Jake thought for the first few hundred yards. But from that time on something seemed to go wrong with the dory. It had as much drag as though it rested on the bottom. No matter how hard the boy pulled, he got no nearer the shore. The oars became heavier and heavier until at every other stroke he caught a crab. Still, without a word of complaint he rowed on and on. Sweat poured down into his eyes. His hands began to burn. His fingers became so cramped that it seemed they would never straighten out. Back and shoulders and legs ached as they never had before. But Jim let him toil on until Jake could stand his anguish no longer.

"Here, Jim," he gasped at last, "this engine has run out of fuel and oil and everything else. Time for you to be something besides a passenger!"

"You've done nobly! But just watch me!" grinned Jim in derision.

Now, if anything, Jake was the stronger of the pair, and the dory with its heavy drag produced a quicker effect on Jim than it had on the other. Jake watched his growing fatigue. When it seemed that Jim could hardly pull another stroke, his friend chided him.

"What's the matter, old boy? Put your back into it. Let's get somewhere. Maybe it will help if I whistle. You keep time, will you?"

Jake commenced to whistle a lively tune. Jim stood the challenge as long as he could and then drew in his oars.

"All right, old fellow. I'll crawl if I have to. This is certainly worse than I thought."

So the two once more changed places, and before Jake gave out the second time, they were well inside the point. It was fortunate, too, for by this time the ebb had set in. Had they failed to make the protection of the spit, they might have been carried far downstream. Much to their surprise, they discovered that the point projected farther into the arm than they had anticipated. Moreover, they could now see that a considerable stretch of country lay between the shore and the mountains. For this reason, Jake continued his rowing until his back and arms once more warned him that it was time to rest. Then he headed direct for the beach. A muddy tide flat was already showing above the water when they grounded at considerable distance from the grass-covered shore. Thinking they could find a better landing place, they forced the boat

back into deeper water and rowed on. But when they tried again for a landing, they struck the shelving bottom still farther away from the solid ground of the spit.

"We'd better wait until the tide runs out," Jim proposed. "We may be on a bar with deeper water between here and shore. It won't take long."

They were still several hundred yards from the spit when they gave up the struggle. As the tide ebbed, all the space between them and the shore revealed itself as oozy, slippery mud. It drained rapidly, however, and Jake stepped overboard with one foot to try its firmness. The merest pressure sank his foot ankle-deep.

"Whew! he complained. "It's too thin to walk on, and it's too thick to swim in! What'll we do? Get down and roll over it?"

Jim laughed. "We'll just take off our shoes and wade it. But first throw out the hook. Somebody may come along and want a good boat. We're through with it at last. Put on your pack and take the rifle. I'll bring the axe."

Thus the boys disembarked. With much slipping and sliding they slowly made firmer ground, where they wiped off the mud as best they could and put on their shoes.

"Gee, Jim," Jake complained, "it looks like a long mush back to the hills. I hope everything won't be twice as far as it looks from this distance."

"We'll do it, one mile at a time, not all at once," answered Jim shortly.

Crossing to the upper side of the spit, they headed for the back country. The way might be far, but

their packs were light and the boys were relieved to be on firm ground. But scarcely two miles had been traversed when appetite made itself felt.

"Must be three or four o'clock," was Jim's comment as he squinted up at the sun. "I'm hungry enough to eat a raw dog, but I wanted to get out of sight before we built a fire."

"There's nobody to see us. I'm as hungry as you are. The question with me is, where are the eats coming from?"

Jim said nothing, although he was worrying over the same problem. Immediately before them an unusual number of sea-gulls was circling about, some of them even appearing to resent the onward progress of the boys. Neither boy thought of them as possible food or in connection with food. But when Jim suddenly crunched something beneath his heavy shoes, and looking down, discovered that he had stepped on two eggs about the size of a bantam's, he looked startled and then began to grin.

"I've made myself an omelette to start with," he called to Jake. "I had no idea gulls would be nesting this late in the season. But I know of at least one pair that don't know when to quit."

Jake at once grasped the idea.

"Well, if one pair can't tell when nesting time is past, maybe there are others. Birds of a feather flock together, you know. I'd say that, judging from the way these birds are acting, there must be other nests around."

"If there are, we're fixed for supper. Mind now where you plant your feet."

Much to the boys' delight, a hasty search revealed several nests, or what had once been nests. These were little rounded holes in the grass and sand that contained fragments of shell and an occasional egg. The first of these that they broke gave out an odour that almost stifled them, but they did find about thirty eggs that appeared more promising. These the boys carried with them in their tin bucket.

"We ought not to pitch camp short of the big timber," said Jim when they had looked over the ground. "We can't make much shelter with the stuff that grows here on this spit. We're going to need some real firewood and a real lean-to with only two blankets to keep us warm. But we'll camp at the first promising place." •

"That sounds mighty good to me," was Jake's quick reply. "I'm aching to get at these eggs. What's the matter with that clump just ahead?"

"I wish we were farther in, but I reckon it'll do. My tummy is scraping on my backbone!" was Jim's answer.

The grove was of fair-sized timber, and upon reaching it packs were dropped and Jake, who really did like to use an axe, set to work with a will. Jim carefully deposited the precious eggs in a safe place and took a step or two away. Then he came back rather sheepishly and picked up the pail once more.

"Say, Jake," he called to the other, "I don't believe I want to drink this water from the arm!"

Jake stopped his axe in mid air. "Me neither," he shouted back. "Mud and salt are bad enough

between your feet, but when it's between your teeth—well, that lets me out right now."

A hurried walk of an hour took the boys well back to higher ground, and here the stream that they had begun to follow flowed clear and sweet. Timber ideal for their purpose stood all about, and the boys forthwith went into camp. As night was approaching, both laboured at the erection of their shelter and the collection of firewood. Thereafter, the eggs were investigated, but the first half-dozen were broken with the single result of almost driving the boys from that vicinity. But in their supply some were found of sufficient wholesomeness to provide, along with the bacon, a hearty meal. Of course the eggs had a strong fishy taste, but the boys consoled themselves by thinking that a fishy taste to eggs is no worse than a fishy taste to fish. They tried their best to be content with only half their scrambled eggs, but their young stomachs were too empty, and so they finished the whole lot. No breakfast was in sight, but this troubled them not one whit. The next meal is never a source of worry when one's stomach is still full.

Before they sought their blankets, Jim again resorted to his map and estimated the distance they would have to traverse the wilds. He sought also to lay off a course to be followed through the mountains. As the crow flies, the distance to Seward did not appear to be over three days' journey at the longest. The distance to the railroad appeared still shorter. This estimate he arrived at because he believed that while the map might be woefully lacking in details, it must contain at least

some semblance of proportion. On the other hand, he realized that such a chart gave, with but little regard for exactness, streams and mountains that might in reality prove almost insuperable obstacles to himself and Jake, poorly equipped as they were. He therefore believed that he should allow at least a week for the journey overland. Even this doubled time would be discounting any accidents that might befall them through storms or the incidents natural to travelling over such a country as lay before them. He was also quite sure that the cardinal points of the map were fairly to be relied upon. He therefore felt quite satisfied with these two deductions from their map study. In the first place, they must hold to a course a little east of south; and in the second, they should be within striking distance of Seward at the end of a week.

These presumptions he carefully explained to Jake with the added caution that they must guard their supply of bacon and matches. Of course the bacon by itself would not keep them from starving, but it would help them in preparing game that they hoped to get with the gun.

Now, in all their discussion of the long miles of wilderness that lay untracked before them, there was not much worry upon their part. For the North has this effect upon those who encounter its dangers—instead of frightening into inaction by its loneliness and perils, it challenges humans with red blood in their veins to overcome its resistance. The boys had also learned that the many niceties of civilization are not essential to the preservation

of life. Indeed, it is surprising how well the determined character can get along under the most primitive conditions. A camp-fire will warm quite as comfortably as the most finished heating installation; and a stray bird or animal will satisfy hunger as completely as the most elaborate banquet. It was because of this knowledge, acquired by experience, that the boys sank to sleep that night not a bit concerned because no breakfast had as yet been provided.

Nevertheless, the next morning the first few miles proved wearisome to the young prospectors. Without even building a fire, they had started out on an empty stomach in the hope of picking up some game as they travelled towards the hills. But not even a bird, save only the gulls, was flying about, and these the boys did not think of as a possible source of food. Doubtless thoughts of fishy eggs acted as a deterrent in protecting the gulls. But hunger is demoralizing, and the boys were consequently growing pessimistic as they entered a narrow valley on their way towards the saddle which had been marked as their objective from the island refuge.

At length Jake could stand hunger pains no longer and announced, "If we can't eat, we can at least drink. Water will fill us up, at any rate."

So, dropping their packs, they climbed down the bank of the roaring stream to quench their thirst or, rather, to satisfy their hunger by a drink. The place they had chosen was a little pool where flat stones afforded an ideal place to kneel.

"Funny I never thought of them!" said Jim.
"Here's your breakfast, right here waiting for us."

"Humph! Talking about those fish, are you? Where's your line? Where's your hook? Where's your bait? You don't expect to catch those big fellows this way, do you?" said Jake with a sneer as he lunged at a big trout with his hand. Of course the trout darted away, and Jake added, "I told you so."

"Don't get excited," warned the other. "You can get fish without a regular outfit if you try hard enough."

"Let's see you do it," Jake challenged aggressively. "I'll eat all you catch, without cleaning, heads, tails, and everything!"

Without rejoinder, Jim hurried up the bank and secured the axe. Then, after a studious searching of the brush, he selected a straight-stemmed shrub and proceeded to trim off its branches with his pocket knife.

"Don't be so careful," criticized Jake. "Any old stick will do for a pole. What you want to worry about is the rest of your outfit."

Jim still refused to be troubled by the other's ill humour. Instead he kept on trimming the pole until he had a sturdy staff with four strong branches growing near its top. These he now proceeded carefully to trim away until he had an implement that looked for all the world like a wooden fish spear, except that its tines were not armed with barbs.

"I'll take it back—indeed I will," Jake now volunteered. "You certainly are the bright-haired boy."

But the other kept on peeling off the bark and smoothing down the nodes until he actually had a

very serviceable spear. Its wood was hard and its points were sharp. The thing now was to try it out. Disregarding the pool where they had drunk, Jim sought a spot farther upstream where the trout had not been disturbed. Ah! There they lay—just next to that stone. Very cautiously Jim inserted his spear into the stream until the point was scarcely six inches from the great fish. Then he lunged. But Jim had not counted on the refraction of the water, and instead of striking the trout at the shoulders, he barely grazed its tail. The next time he corrected his mistake and pinned his trout. However, he had not stabbed the fish through—he had only clinched it between the tines of his wooden spear. But there the trout was, struggling against the bottom, as helpless as though it had been impaled. While Jim kept boring down upon the fish, Jake removed his footgear, and then snared the trout in his hands. The fish proved to be about fifteen inches long—almost a breakfast in itself.

"I see where we won't starve," Jim exulted with sparkling eyes. "We'll be near trout streams all the way."

"You're so keen, if we can't find fish you'll probably get us something else," Jake congratulated his friend. "But get plenty of fish while you're at it. I can eat at least three such fellows myself!"

With the help of Jake, five more trout were landed in as many minutes, so plentiful were they. Hastily a fire was made. Soon tea-water was boiling and the bacon had been fried. Perhaps the trout were not cooked as well as they might have been, but what a feast they made!

Jim was rather cocky about his triumph.

"Tell you what," he said, rather grandiloquently to the other. "They say up here on the Alaskan coast, 'When the tide's out, the table is spread.' I reckon it's all true. But all the same, it's my opinion many an old-timer has gone hungry because he never thought about making a wooden spear."

CHAPTER VIII

WRECKED IN THE RAPIDS

THE two friends were in rare good humour when they resumed their march towards the saddle. The forest floor was bare of underbrush. Apart from a rather steep grade, walking was excellent. They had no immediate objective such as town or road-house, a definite distance ahead which they must make by dinner-time. There was no particular place where they planned to spend the night. There were no mile-posts to inform them how far they had come and how much farther they had to travel. Without any of these worries that so often make the miles along the motor roads tedious to a degree, they jubilantly trudged on and on, knowing that if they kept going, somehow, sometime, they would come to the end of the trail.

Instead of discussing wearying mileage, they imaginatively portrayed what they would do when the journey was behind them. Pictures of their parents' astonishment when they would relate their adventures in the Alaska woods—the open-eyed wonder with which their school friends would receive tales they would have to tell—their own probable return to Alaska next summer when, under the leadership of old Bill, a big company of workmen would begin development of their property—the possible value of the first year's output

from their mine—all these formed thrilling subjects of conversation.

It was not until they found themselves combating a dense thorny growth which suddenly filled the treeless spaces of the forest that they really gave thought to their onward march. These devil's-clubs, strong, stubby shrubs with hard, vicious fish-hook excrescences that grab and tear and rend the unwary musher, presented such a barrier that the two were forced to give much thought to the going. Fatigued by the arduous toil involved in overcoming these obstructions, the boys sat down to rest. It was while they lounged here that they, for the first time, consulted their compass. Up to this point they had been simply following the narrow valley with its companionable stream, without paying any heed to the direction the valley might be tending. And when they found it had sheered off from a southerly bearing until now it bore almost due west, the lads were dismayed. They knew only too well that every step taken west of south would have to be retraced.

"We'll have enough trouble without going out of our way like this," said Jim ruefully. "This comes from believing that easy footing must necessarily point the way to take. First thing we know, we'll be heading back towards the arm." Jim spoke more wisely than he knew. If they had continued to follow the valley's course, they would, after climbing over intervening ridges, have found themselves well over towards the inlet. "After this, we'll consult the compass oftener."

But Jake sought to make light of their error.

"What's a mile or two?" he scoffed. "We can start south from here as well as we could an hour back."

"Every mile counts. This carelessness must stop; and it has stopped right here. Look at this needle! It says to cross this creek and head up the mountain. Maybe we won't find any game higher up—I haven't noticed even a cottontail * so far this morning. So before we leave the creek you'd better try your luck with the spear and we'll take some fish along for dinner."

"What if there's no water around at dinner-time? We'd better fill up here, even if we aren't very hungry."

This was certainly a wise suggestion and Jim recognized its appeal. The boys had no difficulty at all in securing a sufficient number of trout, for they were plentiful in these upper waters, even though of smaller size. But when it came to preparing them, Jim was aghast at the inroad made on their bacon, and proposed that the trout be boiled.

"Boiled fish?" echoed Jake. "I never heard of such a dish."

"Eaten canned salmon, haven't you?" Jim retorted. "Well, you're going to eat boiled trout now! It ought to be just as good."

The boys discovered that boiled trout, as they prepared it, was not as tasty as salmon. Perhaps their appetites had not been sufficiently whetted, or else the trout lacked proper seasoning—they had only salt. But not one word of disappointment was indulged in. They simply ate what they could of

A common American wood rabbit.

this plain woods diet, and then resumed the march.

They found the ascent of the mountain rather difficult at first, for considerable smaller stuff was encountered. When the timber line was reached, they were compelled to alter their course, here and there, by the dense growth of brush that in clumps, both large and small, grew on the hillside, with their intertwined tops pointing almost directly down the slope, thus presenting an impossible abattis. But, sweating and panting, they mounted above the brush to the grasslands that extended to the top of the mountain. At the summit they again resorted to the compass, and their hearts sank when the infallible needle declared that the path lay across another valley that fell away before them, with its black depths in turn replaced by another mountain chain to be laboriously conquered.

It was here that the venturesome lads first realized what exploring an untravelled wilderness is like. Within the range of vision to their front they could see nothing but mountain peaks covered with snow. Greenish-yellow meadows with their moss and lichens reached up to a region of eternal snow. Below the meadow, black forests formed a third bottom layer! Through this wilderness they must find a way with only their compass for a guide. So far as they knew, they would be the only human beings in all that vast territory. If one should break a bone or become ill, no succour of any kind would be available. In its depths there were no towns or cities or even a farm. No train whistle disturbed its quiet. No bridges spanned its frequent streams. But the two were wise enough not to

enlarge upon the difficulties before them. No danger would be twice encountered because they had imagined its existence before actually confronting it. No difficulty would be thrown across their path until its actual barrier opposed them. Jim had given them their motto. "Only one mile at a time," and each would strive to live only in the present.

Since a downhill trail is an easy trail, their hearts grew lighter as they warmed to their work. Luckily there were no cliffs to cause any embarrassment. Without pause of any kind, they travelled on until they once more reached timber line, before sitting down for a breathing spell.

"We made it in a beeline so far," Jim said as he again consulted the compass. "I wonder what the old-timers did when placed as we are. It's hard to keep one's directions straightened out when mushing through a forest."

"I reckon they simply kept going—no place in particular, you know, but just going. They had time to burn and didn't have a care in the world."

"I suppose that was the way of it. But we do have a definite job on our hands—we're trying to reach Seward. At times they too must have had other business than simply seeing the country. How did they get there? Merely ramble about until they broke through goodness knows where?"

"They couldn't have learned the country all at once. Maybe they travelled so slowly that they could remember all the landmarks. Why, we know how that is. I'm pretty certain that if we had to come back through here next summer, we wouldn't

make the same mistake as we did across the mountain."

"When they had a compass I hope they got as much comfort out of it as I do from mine. But let's hike. We can sit and talk when we have less important business before us." A last look at the compass, and Jim led the way into the great woods.

In something like an hour they heard the sound of running water. A few moments more brought them to a river which, they recognized at first sight, presented a real obstacle. Its swirling waters, and the very size of the stream, declared only too plainly that wading it was utterly impossible. They therefore traced out its course downstream for more than a mile and desisted only when the terrain made it evident that just below, the river plunged into a walled canyon. In the stretch examined they found only one reach of the stream where, because of its greater width, they presumed that the depth would be least. But this possible crossing was so close to the canyon mouth, and its waters presented such an appearance of possible danger, that they decided not to risk a crossing there. It was altogether probable, or so they reasoned, that in the great gorge falls might be found. Even without this added hazard, the canyon could not be dared, for once they were borne within its portals, the roaring river might carry them miles out of their way.

Disappointed by what they found, they turned back upstream, studying the river closely as they went. Their first opinion was confirmed. Its whole course was broken with rocks about which angry

waters swirled. White water was everywhere. Violent whirlpools lay in the lee of the larger rocks. All in all, the river was calculated to daunt the stoutest heart. Perhaps the two friends would have hesitated long before the crossing, had they been more experienced. But experience had not as yet tamed their adventurous spirits. The only evidence they gave of uneasiness lay in a further examination of the stream above where they had first struck its course. Conditions above being no more promising, they returned to the initial point for their venture.

Although the afternoon was now half spent, enough time remained to attempt a crossing if all should go well.

"It sure looks pretty bad to me," said Jim, voicing the thought of both. "But we're just losing time in staring at the river. Looking at it will never get us across. We've got to make some kind of a raft."

"Why won't one big log do as well as a raft? It will be quicker to get into the water."

"I think you're wrong about that," Jim answered. "It will take a pretty good-sized timber to carry us over; so big, in fact, it would be almost impossible to get it into the water. Besides, we can't pole a log or paddle it; we'd be rolled off in no time. We must have something that we can pole, if we don't want to get swept downstream into that canyon. We can do some poling from a raft. At least, it won't roll us off, if we can keep it together."

"That's the trouble! We haven't any spikes, we haven't even a piece of string to fasten logs to-

gether. There isn't a single vine growing in these woods and these bushes are too brittle to tie. All we have is an axe and our knives. I suppose we could roll logs into the water and then drop a couple of crosspieces in them to bind them together.'

Jim shook his head in disagreement.

"I've thought of that too; but there's a hitch in it. Just look at the waves around those rocks. If we didn't strike that white water just square, one log might be dropped out of the crosspiece and our raft would go to pieces. If we had an auger to bore holes with, we might pin it together. But we've got to use just what we have. I think I know something that will do. Let's find a launching place."

Near a sloping bank, an eddy was found about two feet deep and of adequate size to contain the raft. On the water edge of this eddy, stakes were driven against which the raft might be moored. The raft itself was next to be considered, and Jim began his search for two dry trunks of the right size, among trees that grew to the very edge of the stream. On account of their dryness, these would be lighter and consequently more buoyant. Dry stubs were scattered all about in the forest growth, and a short search revealed some that would make logs about sixteen feet long and as many inches in diameter. Two were selected, cut out, and rolled to a place above the eddy.

"We'll need some birch for wedges now," announced Jim when the logs lay parallel to each other. "We've got to split one of these timbers, and I think we can do it."

"What for? You don't need to floor it, do you?" asked Jake blankly.

"I can do things better than I can describe them," Jim assured him. "You hold these wedges while I shape them up."

Four wedges tapering to a blunt point were manufactured from the birch, and these measured about two feet in length. Then ensued strenuous labour. But by dint of unwearied effort that alternated in the swinging of the axe and the driving of the wooden wedges, the log was partly opened its entire length. No sooner was this completed than Jim knocked out the wedges. The gaping crack closed almost tightly, as though the log had never been split.

"What's that for? Looks like so much hard effort wasted!" Jake complained as he helped to reopen the split.

"I had to make sure she'd spring back," Jim impatiently explained. "If the crack didn't close up tight, I'd have to try again. But it's all fine and dandy. Now I want four cedar crotches for ties."

Proper crotches were harder to find than logs had been. But finally they were found. All the while Jake was muttering in dissatisfaction because he had not fathomed the other's plan. To him, the raft still looked a long way off. Jim was little provoked by his partner's reiterated doubts. He believed Jake would soon see his scheme, and he simply kept on working. A couple of stringers were laid down, and upon these the dry logs were rolled. Next in order was to pass a cedar crotch about the unsplit log, and to lop off the two ends to such a

length that when these ends were thrust into the crack of the other log, both logs lay snugly side by side.

A light now broke in upon Jake as the whole scheme of construction was revealed.

"I'm sorry, old man," he hastened to apologize. "I'm a dummy most of the time, but I know the rest. You'll roll the stuff into the water and do the same thing over again. Then when you've got all four ties in place, you'll knock out the wedges. Bully for you! If I could scheme out things like that, my hat wouldn't fit at all!"

"I think she'll do," grinned Jim at the other's enthusiastic compliment. "This cedar isn't as strong as good rope, but she'll stand lots of strain."

They now rolled the logs into the eddy and bound them together with the cedar ties. Both boys climbed aboard their novel raft and found it sufficiently buoyant for their purpose. It was apparent, however, that the logs were too loosely coupled to support each other properly. This time Jake solved the problem.

"Let me contribute my share of the thinking," he eagerly cried. "Let's get some poles and give each a twist."

"That certainly will do it—I never would have thought of that," Jim said magnanimously.

When binding poles had been sprung into position, they not only tightened the withes, but filled up the open space between the logs, affording a sort of deck.

"Now for the freight," said Jim. "We'll get everything soaked, but that can't be avoided. A

good fire will dry out the blankets by night, and water won't hurt the other stuff. But we can't afford to lose anything. If the raft breaks up, everything will be gone. Let's tie the blankets to the logs—we can wrap them round and round."

"Just a minute—your think-tank's sprung a leak!" Jake interrupted. "I can go you one better than that. Let's wrap our shoes and everything else in the blankets as tight as we can, and then ram the edges of the blankets into the split."

Jim agreed, and their cargo, tightly wrapped, was fastened to the raft as Jake suggested. Two saplings were cut for push poles. The boys took station, Jake at the bow and Jim at the stern. Before they pushed off, they took another survey of the threatening waters.

"It's now or never," said Jim grimly. "Anything can happen. We'll be shot a long way downstream. We may strike a rock that will bust us up. Remember this—if she does go to pieces, grab for the split log, and we'll at least be together. We'll have our stuff with us too. Our landing place will be just where we can make it."

Jake was a little frightened both by the savage water and his comrade's soberness. But only commenting, "If we're born to be hanged, we'll never be drowned!" he pulled out the mooring stake. Jim shoved on his pole—the voyage was begun. Working very carefully, they poled out of the quiet waters of the eddy. All went well until real current was reached, then things began to happen. Their raft leaped into bewildering action, like a thing alive. Misadventure almost overtook Jim at once.

On his first attempt to shove the raft sideways to prevent it swinging around, his pole dropped into a deep hole from which some huge rock had been rolled. With a startled cry he felt himself following the pole into the depths. He made an agonized clutch for something to stop his plunge and his fingers gripped the binding pole. It took repeated and violent efforts to drag himself from the pull of the current to the safety of the raft.

"Down on your knees, Jake!" he shrieked at the other. "You can't stand up. You'll get pitched off and drowned!"

Jake needed no such command. Even a trained riverman with calked boots could not have stood upright on those erratic logs. The whole raft tossed about in the rough waters as though some monster was batting it about from below as a cat plays with a mouse. No movement of the raft could be foreseen and guarded against. It floated sideways; it whirled about; at moments it stood on edge; at others, almost on end. Whenever they struck a whirlpool, the raft spun so rapidly that the boys lost all sense of direction. There were moments when Jake, who still clung to his push pole, did not know which way to thrust to find bottom. He did the best he could and, as conditions permitted, crawled like a fly towards the raft's centre, where a push from his pole might prove more effective in making leeway, instead of starting the raft off on one of its mad spins.

Suddenly a huge rock reared above the water directly ahead. They bore down upon it like an express train. It seemed to them that the raft

must be shattered by the waiting rock. But as the rushing torrent split against the barrier, the raft tossed to one side like a chip. They went whirling on. A second rock rose before them. They again expected ruin. Once more the raft lurched aside. But real damage was done by the tremendous strain. The binding with the above which Jim was kneeling tore loose to lash him in the face. The binding pole, freed from its fastening, hurled itself over lengthwise, to crack Jake across the shoulders. The blow almost knocked him overboard. As soon as he regained his balance, he loosened the other end of the pole and passed it back to Jim.

Jim at once began to help Jake in pushing the raft towards the farther shore. But little progress was made. Neither could do much. They raced so rapidly downstream that even when their poles touched bottom the raft was hurtled on before they could push. The raft itself was no longer so much of a unit as it had been. The other yokes were slowly but surely being torn from the grip of the split log. Each separate log was beginning almost independent movements in the tempestuous rapids. The boys soon found it impossible to do anything except cling for life itself, first to one log and then to its mate. Foaming water washed completely over them both. Then came the end. For an instant the raft righted and, straight as an arrow, went leaping down the froth-covered current. A faint hope sprang up in the hearts of the voyagers. But no sooner was hope rekindled than an angry split in the current showed up immediately in their course. This time, instead of being pitched to one

side or the other of this sinister "V", the raft careened madly and directly over it with one log on each arm of the "V." Like a huge knife, the submerged rock sheared its way through the remaining ties, splitting the logs far apart as though they had been tied with cotton strings.

Each boy instinctively clutched at the split log, as had been agreed. Then over and under they went. The mad waters could not tear them loose. Choking, gasping, drowning, they fought with all their might to keep on top. So far as each had time between submergings to look about, he sought to discover the other's presence and his own whereabouts. For moments, blinding spray prevented even any sight of shore. The log kept on rolling and plunging. So far as each sometimes knew, he himself was the only survivor, and terror deeper than before laid hold on them.

A few moments of this blind instinctive battle for air, and suddenly the log ceased in part its insane movements. Now the boys found themselves being beaten against the river bottom. The rolling log threatened their destruction. But bruised and battered as they were, each soon dully understood that they had reached the shallow stretch of water just above the canyon. Renewed life came to them. Almost at once the violent twisting and pounding of the log in the shallows broke their grasp. The log tumbled on by itself. The boys, crawling, creeping, now under the surface entirely, now catching a chance to breathe life-giving air, tumbled after. A few feet more and the log came to rest. Against its rough bark they were immediately thrown, still

alive, but bruised and battered almost to the breaking point. For many minutes they lay there inert, partly submerged in the ice-cold water, seeking to collect their scattered senses, noting only that they were both still alive.

When a measure of strength returned, Jim waved like a drunken man, first at his partner and then at the near-by shore.

"I guess we made it, old-timer, even if our raft didn't come through!" he feebly whispered.

Jake responded as well as he could to the other's effort to discount their all but fatal voyage.

"Looks like we did make the crossing. But just now I feel as much broken up as the raft," was his hoarse reply.

Soon Jim tottered to his feet and looked fearfully for the blankets that held their precious axe and gun. There they were, almost covered by the water. At least he could see the blankets still clinging to the log. With many groans they rolled the log over, so that they might investigate the folds of the blanket. Gladness swept over them as they felt the axe and the little gun and their other gear. But the battering against the bottom had been almost too much for the skillet and pail—they were jammed quite out of shape.

CHAPTER IX

FOREST PIG

THE boys soon proved that discomfort, unnoticed during a period of stress, will make itself felt as soon as the stimulus of danger and excitement is removed. During their maddening descent of the rapids they had not felt the freezing waters, although continuously submerged in whole or in part. But when safety was assured, the first movement that might be described as natural brought their blood to the surface, and they shivered from cold as with the ague. Further investigation of the blankets ceased at once.

"C-c-come on, J-J-J-Jake," Jim stammered through chattering teeth as he feebly tugged at the other, who still lay across the wreckage of their raft. "This will nev-nev-never d-d-d-do. W-w-we've g-got to g-g-get warm."

Jake groaningly struggled to his feet.

"B-b-b-bring the axe, I-I-I-I——" here utterance completely failed him - his teeth rattled like the roll from a side-drum.

But Jim urged him towards the shore.

"N-n-n-no f-f-fire n-n-now," he directed. "Ex-exer-exercise instead!"

This advice was timely, but difficult to follow. The two were in their stockinged feet. As they laboriously waded the shallows, even though their lower

limbs were almost paralysed from cold, the sharp stones of the river bottom, and the larger rocks rolled across their feet by the swift current, added more pain to their misery. But once shore was gained, resisting the impulse to throw themselves down on the green turf, they heroically tottered up and down the margin of the stream in a half-stupor. Exercise was the right remedy for their troubles. It revealed of course unsuspected bruises, but gradually their feeble walk increased to a trot; and as the warm blood once more coursed strongly through its natural channels, their former energy returned. And with it, their customary optimism.

"We're ready for that fire," Jim cried when at length he ran back to the shore off which their broken raft and its slender burden lay.

Jake was just behind him as they waded the shallows, bent on recovering what could be salvaged. So securely had the blankets been jammed into the log and so tenaciously did its two halves cling together, that much to the boys' regret they were compelled to slash a blanket before their axe could be extricated from the clinging folds. Once the axe could be utilized, a few moments' work shaped wedges to spring the log apart. Their match-safes had withstood all attacks by the water, and roaring flames soon added their good cheer. But the few minutes spent in the comfort of the fire also served to intensify the pain of their bruises; and when they rose to prepare for the night, many and vociferous were their complaints.

"I'll belong to another race of men in the morning," Jake sighed as he rubbed a sore shin. "I'll

not be white any longer—I'll belong to the tribe of Black and Blues!"

Despite aches and pains, however, they had soon thrown together a snug lean to, for the travellers realized that an uncomfortable night was more to be dreaded than sore muscles. Then came the spreading out of their scanty supplies.

"Lucky that sack of salt still holds together," Jim said. "But this tea won't have much strength left if it gets another wetting."

Pail and skillet were hammered back into something like their former shape. The rifle was wiped off after the shells were removed from the magazine. But extra ammunition was nowhere to be found. They followed their course back to the water, they waded the stream to the log; they rolled over the loose stones on which the log lay; but all this without success. The extra shells were gone—they had no ammunition save five shells that had been in the magazine.

"Bad—mighty bad!" said Jim soberly. "It means we can use only one shell a day, even if we have the best of luck. We can't afford to miss a shot."

"Oh, well, we can live on fish if we have to," Jake answered with a wry face.

"Then let's start right now with fish for supper. Get busy. It's your turn to use the spear."

Here disappointment again entered in. They followed the river, searching its pools, but no fish could they find save small fry that could not be speared. An hour and more was spent in this fruitless search. Then a hunt for game began, but not a

ptarmigan, not a bird of any kind, not one animal was encountered.

Prospects for supper were discouraging. The boys were glum, and with good reason. They were tired—they were sore from head to foot—most aggravating of all, they were ravenously hungry, with no food in sight.

"Maybe we'll have better luck in the morning," Jake ventured. "Two meals a day are not so bad. But I tell you what, boy; I wish I still had some of those boiled trout that I turned up my nose at, back there across the hills."

"Same here! After this I intend to eat anything in sight whether I feel like it or not! Also after this we're going to pack the grub that we can't finish right then. We're taking altogether too many chances."

"If we can't eat, what's the matter with going to bed? We can at least sleep and forget our troubles."

"You do get an idea, now and then," Jim agreed with a crooked smile.

Their fire was built up and shoes were placed where it was believed they would readily dry. The boys toasted themselves through and through, and warmed the now dry blankets. Then hastily they wrapped themselves for the night under the shelter of the lean-to. But the bed was uncomfortable, or so they thought, although they had given much care to its preparation. What they really suffered from was the effect of that battering drag in the shallow waters. They rolled and tossed as humans always do under such conditions. All the time hunger grew. But at last complaints grew fewer and

fewer, and the next moment would have found both asleep. Indeed, Jake had practically forgotten all his troubles when Jim nudged him to wakefulness.

With senses fully roused, both now listened. All was quiet, and Jake was ready to vent his resentment at being disturbed over nothing, when a rustling sound alongside their shelter broke the stillness. It was followed by a scratching, clicking noise now close at hand, now farther removed. Evidently some forest prowler was investigating these intruders on his wilderness domain. Just as people will under such circumstances until experience has taught them better, the boys thought that some dangerous beast, perhaps even a brown bear, was causing the disturbance. Cautiously Jim rose on one elbow and peered out. It was not yet dark; the fire was still blazing merrily. He was ready to believe that the invader, whatever it was, had withdrawn; for he could hear and see nothing except the crackling flames. Satisfied that all was well, he was sinking back into the warm blankets when the visitor deliberately brushed against the lean-to, and began to force an entrance through the loose brush wall. With a bound, both boys were out of bed. If their visitor wanted the lean-to more than they, he was welcome to it. But standing by the fire, courage returned.

"Whatever it is, the thing wants our bacon," whispered Jim excitedly. "We can't stand for that—it's our only hope. Grab a blazing stick—even a bear will run from fire." •

Each boy picked up a flaming faggot and cautiously edged about the lean-to. They could see

nothing but a swaying of the brush, and soon that ceased. The animal, or whatever it was, had forced an entrance through the loosely constructed barrier.

"It's nothing to be scared of," Jim declared, though with not too great assurance, as he led to the open side of the shelter. "It's too small for that."

They peered inside the shadows of their hut, and there, busily engaged at gnawing the bacon, was a half-grown porcupine.

"Scat! Scat!" yelled Jake. "Get out of there! Leave that bacon be!"

Jim grinned as much in relief as at the other's words.

"That porky doesn't understand English. What he needs is a poke with a club."

Both boys advanced to the attack when suddenly Jim stopped.

"What's the matter with us?" he shouted. "We couldn't find our supper, but our supper's found us!"

"You're the crazy one, not me!" the other ungrammatically shouted, but just as loudly. "Eat that thing? I'll starve first."

"All right, all right, you can starve if you want to, but I'm going to eat. Old Bill said porcupine was mighty good eating."

Jake's hunger got the better of him at this announcement. He grabbed up the rifle and threw a shell into the chamber. "Where'll I hit him?" he questioned.

"Don't shoot him at all," Jim bade him. "You know as well as I do he won't run off. Anyway he

can't move faster than a waddle. You poke him out here where I won't make a mess near the bed, and I'll finish him with the axe."

Gingerly the other did as directed. The porcupine at first refused to be coerced and slapped viciously with his spiny tail. But Jake persisted in his discomfiture of the rebellious animal. It soon gave over resistance and was herded out into the open, where it squatted with no fear in its beady black eyes that stared at the boys unwinkingly, and tail ready for defence.

"He's only half grown, and I hate to kill him," said Jim as he raised the axe. But the next moment the porcupine was dead, slain with one quick blow of the keen axe. "We'd better bleed him, and he's a bad case to handle. You drag him over to that log and I'll chop off his head."

Jake carefully dragged the animal by its forefoot to the log, and the deed was done. Then came the business of skinning and cleaning the carcass. That a porcupine must be handled with extreme care, the boys soon discovered. Its quills are sharp as needles, with almost invisible barbs, that come away like so many slivers at the slightest irritation. But they finally succeeded in stripping the animal of its armour, and then dismembered the body with the axe. The pieces of flesh were cleansed in the river.

"Here is something that we can boil, and should boil to save what's left of the bacon," said Jim as he filled the pail with water. "They say that porcupine is tougher than tripe, but this fellow must have been young. Anyway, with a big meal in sight

we can afford to wait, even if he's tough as sole leather."

A crotched stick was driven into the earth hard by the fire, and through this a pole was thrust so that when the pail was suspended from its end it would hang above the flames. The fire was stirred up. For some time the boys stood staring at the blaze and then Jim asked, "Ever hear about Elijah and the ravens?"

The other shook his head.

"Well, Elijah was an old fellow that lived a long, long time ago. He was forced to flee for his life to a spot where there wasn't any food. The Bible says that ravens brought him food and so his life was saved. I've always had my doubts about that story, but I don't any longer. Here we are just about starved"—which of course was hardly correct—"and along comes this porky to fill us up."

"Whether the story is true or not, I'm pretty positive I'd rather eat porcupine than ravens. Ravens? Ugh!"

Jim agreed with a grin. "I've seen what ravens and crows eat, and I reckon it's the same here. I don't know what porkies eat, and what I don't know won't hurt me." He stood lost in thought for some time and then went on, "Most States, so they say, have a law against the hunting of porcupine. It's the only animal that can be killed with a club, and many a lost man has been saved from starvation because a porky came ambling along."

As he stirred the stew, he noted the shoes by the fire and stopped to examine them. They were still soaking wet, and to facilitate drying he hung them

on pegs with soles towards the flames. Now there was nothing to do but wait. Their stew was boiling and bubbling, although far from being cooked, and its appetizing odour aggravated the boys' hunger. Cooking would take at least an hour, perhaps longer, and for comfort's sake they threw themselves down on their bed. Night invaded the forest depths and the fire-glow only served to deepen its blackness. The boughs and blankets were soft and refreshing to their tired muscles, and ere they were aware, drowsiness seized upon them. Jake roused himself to replenish the fire and again sought his couch. All was well.

SOME time later—it must have been several hours—he found himself sitting bolt upright in bed. Hardly a burning ember could he see, but a horrible odour pervaded the atmosphere, almost nauseating him by its intensity. For moments he sought to reason out what this malodorous incense could be, but failing in this, his hunger pangs drove him towards the kettle of stew. Rising quietly, he tiptoed towards the fire without rousing his sleeping comrade. One glance at the porcupine stew was enough—it was this which sent out that terrible smell. The meat upon which they had counted so heavily was burned to a crisp in the blackened pail! Not one edible scrap could he find. Stealthily he crawled back into bed without waking Jim. What was the sense in breaking bad news? Let Jim discover how things were for himself!

Sick at heart, he snuggled up to the other with the pangs of hunger gnawing afresh. Soon tired nature lulled him again to sleep. When he next

returned to consciousness, Jim was sitting by the fire disconsolately examining first one shoe and then the other.

As Jake joined him, Jim held up his shoes and said bitterly, "This is what we get for more carelessness. My shoes are about done for. It was bad enough to lose the meat and the pail—but how can I mush without shoes?"

Jake stared at him with round eyes. "The pail? The pail gone too? I got up and found the meat burned up, but I didn't notice the pail."

"Sure, it's completely done for. The solder all melted out when the pail boiled dry. What's more, I haven't been able to scare up a thing for breakfast. I've fished for an hour and I haven't seen even a minnow. I've tramped these woods and I haven't heard even a chickadee. We're up against it at last. All we can do is to pull in our belts and keep plugging along as best we can."

Jake groaned in sympathy. "I'm almost ready to tackle that burnt leather. I'm starving right now."

"I haven't a doubt but that sole leather would be as tasty as the porky. I noticed that you had been picking away at the pail. I tried to bite into some of it, but I'd rather try to swallow wood ashes. It was awful! I've made us some tea in the skillet. Let's drink that and be on our way."

They drank the bitter, scalding tea, turn and turn about, and then Jim tried to pull on his shoes. They had shrunk—the soles were wrinkled into hard black rolls. If Jim had been wiser to the trail he would never have started out with his feet

cramped and tortured by the shapeless gear, for the first lesson the musher has to learn is to protect his feet at all hazards. Jim strove valiantly to keep up a brisk pace for a hundred yards. Then his feet gave out entirely. He was not a profane boy, but he came very close to expressing himself in language that would have seared the atmosphere. Jake stood by in silent sympathy as Jim drew off his useless shoes.

Theirs was a gloomy outlook when once more they resumed the march, Jim in his stocking feet. The forest floor was no longer carpeted with soft grass and leaves, as the lower valley by the river margin had been. Now it was broken with rocks and covered with broken limbs. Stockings were no protection at all to his tender feet, and again he had to give over his struggle. "This won't do at all," he had the courage to admit. "I can't be laid up with bad feet. Unless I can make some shift to protect them, we'll have to stop, and then we will starve."

"Let's cut up one of the blankets and wrap your feet in the pieces," Jake suggested.

"We need the blankets too bad at night," Jim answered gratefully, but with greater forethought. Still, Jake's suggestion gave him an idea. He studied it over and, axe in hand, he stumbled to a near-by white birch. From this he cut away a piece of the leathery bark, and then stood upon it. With his knife he proceeded to carve out a slab of the bark somewhat larger than the outline of his foot. "I'll have to use a strip off the blanket for this," he said. "Bring it over here."

Bending the birch well up around his foot, he

bound it in place by two wrappings of the blanket strip. Except that the crude sandal would have to be used in much the same way as a snowshoe, on account of its shovel-like toe, a few steps demonstrated that his foot would be pretty well protected and that he could walk comfortably. The other foot was shod in the same fashion and again they resumed their march.

"Talk about relief!" Jim exulted. "Why, there's everything in these woods that we need if we know how to go about getting it! Let's make up for lost time. I've a hunch we're over the worst part of the trail. We'll find some grub just around the corner. I feel it in my bones."

Something must have been wrong with Jim's clairvoyant bones. At least they were not now recording messages properly, for the whole valley was traversed without their seeing a single sign of animal life. Feet began to drag. Tempers became irritable. Those awful gripping pains of fierce hunger were transforming them into veritable animals seeking their kill. But some self-control still remained; glum and silent they wearily plodded on, only too sure that nothing would be gained by giving up the struggle and going into camp.

Hope was well-nigh dead when they broke across timber line to the treeless upper slopes and meadows of the higher altitudes. And with good reason; for if the forest with its abundant protection for wild life was tenantless, they could not expect to find game where little or no protection was to be had. And they knew that from timber line to the height which they must cross, only these vast grass and

lichen-covered slopes extended without a single cover except that afforded by jutting rocks.

Jim shook his head gloomily at the prospect.

"Looks awful bad to me," he told the other. "I think we can manage the crossing and perhaps we'll find a good fishing stream over there. Maybe we'll run upon a rabbit or two as we go down lower. But it's going to be some pull for us both. I'm so faint now every step seems a mile and I can hardly drag these feet of mine. And my head is splitting, too."

Jake made no reply. He feared to speak lest his feelings should betray his weakness. So with a mere shake of his head he motioned towards the pocket where Jim carried the compass. The proper line was struck, the landmark was fixed in mind, and wearily they toiled towards the ridge that loomed up, seemingly miles ahead.

The boys were now forced to rest at the end of every furlong. Their strength was rapidly waning as much from discouragement as from actual exhaustion. They hardly raised their eyes towards the distant saddle; instead they stared almost unseeingly at the ground directly at their feet.

Half the distance to the summit had been gained, and they were engaged in one of their frequent resting spells, when Jake, wearily gazing at the height yet to be covered, blinked rapidly and then passed the back of his hand across his eyes to clear their vision. Without saying a word he studied the objects that had drawn his attention until he made sure of movement on their part. Where there was movement, there might be life; and where there was life, there might possibly be food. But he would not

believe, nor rouse his comrade's hopes, until convinced that those far-off things were something other than peculiarly coloured rocks.

Jim also, following his fixed look, began to watch and compare the relative position of those objects. Soon each knew without doubt, that the things were animals.

"They must be goats," breathed Jim. "Bully for you—you've got better eyes than mine. Let's make a sneak on them."

There was not a bit of cover of any kind as they moved forward. Consequently as the goats saw the boys' advance, they moved more rapidly to the crest, hesitated there on the skyline, galloped rapidly to the right and then dropped over the ridge out of sight. But up there was meat, if only it could be shot down! Gone now were the cramps and the pain and the hunger! Meat must be theirs! They had no worry over their ability as marksmen or the killing power of the twenty-two. They knew themselves to be accurate shots—many hundreds of rounds had been expended that summer—they could drive a nail as far as they could see it, two times out of three. True, the range of the weapon was limited, but they had high hopes that by careful stalking they could reach easy shooting distance of the game. Conditions for their stalk were right, for the wind blew in their faces. Moreover, the ridge concealed them from sight. And inasmuch as these animals had probably never been hunted, when once out of sight and smell as well, the boys believed the animals would not show much wariness.

Therefore, without making any attempt at concealment, the two eager boys, as rapidly as their condition and Jim's awkward sandals would permit, climbed directly for the crest where the goats had disappeared. As the ridge was gained, they ceased their rapid pace for the sake of quietness, and when within a few yards of the top, Jim, who made more noise than the other because of his clumsy foot covering, motioned for Jake to continue the stalk by himself.

Jake finished the climb alone. While still below the extreme top, he dropped on all fours, and crawled with the stealth of an Indian. Before examining what lay beyond the crest, he dropped prone to the ground to recover his breath and inspect his rifle. Then a few noiseless wriggles, and he slowly raised his head to peer over the moss and boulders. Disappointment greeted him, for nothing was within the range of his vision except another hill extending far above him. Despairingly he reared himself a little higher to find himself looking down into a narrow canyon whose sheer walls were unscalable even by a goat. The goats must have made their way somehow into that abyss, he reasoned, and raised himself almost to his feet for a look into its depths. What he then saw froze him into immobility. Moments passed before he sank down and beckoned Jim to come on.

Jim, who had already stripped off his sandals, softly made his way to the top, where he gazed inquiringly at the other.

Jake had now fallen into a fit of trembling.

"B-b-b-b-bear! B-b-b-b-big brown bear!" He

stuttered worse than when the cold water of the rapids had overcome him.

Jim cautiously straightened up and looked over the edge of the precipice. Then, sinking back, on his haunches, he too contracted the stutters.

"B-b-b-bear? Ah-h-h-I should s-s-say so! B-b-b-but g-g-g-g-oat too!"

CHAPTER X

BLACK BEAR AND BROWN

"I DIDN'T see any goat," Jake whispered.

"Where were your eyes? That big bear was standing right on it. It's dead, and it's our meat. Or at least it will be soon. All we've got to do is to run that bear out of here!"

"Oh, yeah? You're faster on your feet than I am, so you do the running. I don't see myself playing tag with him just yet! Why, those things are man-killers," Jake hissed rather than whispered.

"Maybe this fellow's been half scared to death by hunters. If he has, he'll vamoose from this country without any urging, just as soon as he gets wind of us. We'll go slow; let's ease up and take another good look."

As usual, Jim was the more insistent and persevering of the two. Without being at all foolhardy, he nevertheless was ready to come to grips with any obstacles in his path. And now, instead of rising to his feet for a good look over the crest, he crawled noiselessly to the crest itself, where by a mere lifting of his head he could explore the canyon depths.

Jim had been right about the goat. Directly to their front, on a shelf that jutted out from the cliff some twenty feet or more, a huge bear was standing with one great paw pressing his prey into the rocky

floor. The boys could readily detect that the monster had not yet sensed their presence, although the canyon was scarcely half a city street in width. They therefore, before they should be discovered, looked over the whole terrain. From the edge of the shelf the cliff fell sheer away without a crack or projection of any kind to which even a goat might cling with its padded hoofs. To their left, the shelf on which the bear stood extended for several yards to end abruptly against the mountain wall. Into this cul-de-sac, from which there was no escape except past the bear, another goat had crowded itself against the confining rocks. On their right, at some distance, the shelf fell away towards the canyon floor, down which a tiny brook splashed its way. Evidently the two goats, in fleeing from the boys, had encountered the bear in the canyon, and to escape his rush had sought refuge by way of the shelf. Here they had been trapped; and the bruin, with one tap of his mighty paw, had slain the goat upon which he was now standing.

All this the boys took in at a single glance. But what they could not fathom was the bear's steady concentration upon the lower end of the shelf. Without even that swaying of the head which is so characteristic of bears, he stood there, alert for the boys knew not what. Impelled by the intentness of the animal, they fastened their own eyes upon this part of the scene below. Before they could see anything unusual, the sound of rolling rocks gave evidence of life just where the shelf fell away towards the depths. Next moment another bear drew itself upon the shelf, its head swinging from

side to side, to stroll along towards the brown bear and its prey, as if it had not a care in the world. But this bear was not of the brown family—he was a black, and like the other, a giant of his kind.

The peculiar thing about it all lay in the black's apparent lack of respect for his brown kinsman. Usually—indeed, one may say invariably—the smaller black bear will climb a tree if such be available; or, if there is no such refuge, will clear entirely out of the vicinity as soon as it becomes aware of the brownie's presence. He has good reason for showing this deference, for in temper and fighting power there is simply no comparison between the two. A black will rarely exceed eight hundred pounds in weight, while the great brown bear will frequently tip the scales at more than three-quarters of a ton. Monarch of all he surveys, he numbers the black among his subjects, and the smaller animal will not dispute his reign. But evidently this particular black fellow had no fear of this particular brown. Like a bully he swaggered towards the other, stopping to sniff with his nose towards the sky now and then, but again moving steadily towards his ancient conqueror. For his part, the brown made no hostile demonstration of any kind; he simply stood there astride the goat, malevolently eyeing the other, as much as to say, "This is my kill. You approach at your peril."

The black was oblivious to the other's threatening pose. He still ambled forward, careless and nonchalant, until he stood almost within striking distance of the other. The two boys stared in amazement at the black's foolish effrontery.

"He wants to commit suicide," one whispered to the other. "If he tackles that brown, he won't last a minute."

The black bear had other ideas. He rolled a step or two closer. Then just as a kitten at play will squat on its haunches and stretch out a paw to hook a ball of wool, he crouched down and reached out one forepaw as if to drag the goat away from the brown. Nothing immediately happened. But just at the instant the black's paw touched the goat, whish! the brown bear swept one mighty arm in a great arc towards the insulting blackie, to land with a thud that promised much damage. Seven hundred and fifty pounds of bear meat in turn skidded against the cliff, with what seemed finishing force.

"Oh, what a knock-out punch!" Jim breathed in his friend's ear.

But it wasn't a knock-out, for the black scrambled to his feet and eyed the brown steadily, as if planning his next overture. Then he repeated his same tactics. He jauntily sauntered towards the waiting monster, apparently in a most friendly mood, and repeated his kittenish manoeuvre, as much as to say, "Come on, old fellow. No hard feelings, you know. Let's just have a little sport over the goat." But the big brown was in no playful humour. Deadly earnestness was his as he again unhooked that swishing right paw. Once more the black landed against the rock enclosure of this strange mountain arena. But when he came up this time, all intention and desire to frolic had fled. Red rage glittered in his small black eyes. With open mouth

and lips drawn back from his ready tushes, he rushed the brown, who instantly rose to meet the attack. Fangs clashed against fangs. Then the weight of the brown bore the black to the rocky floor. But somehow, the black rolled from under and jumped to his feet scarcely an arm's length from his foe. Next moment, quicker than light, the black struck with one forepaw, and first blood was his. His slashing claws had caught the slower brown just where its foreleg joined the breast, and ripped a deep gash quite to the elbow.

But the old monarch was not daunted. Lunging towards the black, he gripped him with hairy arms that should have crushed him to jelly. But the black would not be crushed. What arts of savage battles he had elsewhere learned cannot be told. With the skill of a trained wrestler, he tore himself loose; as he freed himself, once more that lightning forepaw streaked towards the brown. This time he landed just below the ear, and another crimson slash marked the brown's muzzle.

The big brown seemed bewildered—his actions resembled those of a groggy man, all but knocked out in the prize-ring. Swaying backward, he stood as if for support against the cliff. And then an astonishing thing happened. The black gave over his offensive, retreated a pace or two, and upreared himself in turn against the cliff. As they stood thus, the live goat that had been penned in beyond the bears trotted solemnly down the shelf under the very noses of the two huge beasts, and scrambled down the rocks in the distance. The whole episode declared without any equivocation that the two

champions would battle solely for the prize killed by the brown.

But once the goat had effected its escape, the black edged towards the brown, who likewise moved forward to accept the gage of renewed battle. The brown made the first lead, and his actions were for all the world similar to those of a pugilist intent on jabbing his antagonist off balance. Only his effort was not a jab—it was a short swing that knocked the black from his feet. But the agile black arose unhurt. One glance at him was sufficient to determine that now he would throw all caution to the wind.

He roared that awful bellow of the enraged bear that cannot be spelled, much less described. In a flash he had fastened himself to his slower antagonist—teeth and claws ripped and tore with frightful effect. Then as suddenly as he had closed, he thrust himself loose. As the black walked slowly about the brown, the boys could see the sad condition of the bigger fighter. Across his abdomen a huge rent had been torn in the tough hide, and he was weltering in his own blood.

A circle of the brown was completed by the black warrior. Then apparently satisfied that he "had his man," the vengeful black bear closed. Snarling, bellowing, tearing with claws, slashing with razor tushes, he fairly smothered his weakened enemy. Once more he sprang free. This time, the blood-smeared brown rose to his feet swaying like a man who has quite lost control of his faculties. His appearance was ghastly. He had been disembowelled by the fiendish talons of his fierce adver-

sary. For a little while he stood slowly swaying with forepaws gently flapping to the front, and head not erect, but canted over on one shoulder. Then he seemed to shrink in on himself. Another effort was made to straighten up, but without lasting result. Next moment, with a groan of anguish almost human, the defeated warrior crumpled to the ground in a heap, and there stretched out.

All this time, the black had stood with head thrust forward close to the ground, as if deliberating whether another rush and tangle would be necessary. When his opponent fell, he himself sank down with muzzle to the foe, apparently knowing that the big brown had reached the end of his war-worn trail. As soon as the other's convulsive twitchings had ceased, the black rose to sniff all about the fallen bear. Then he gave the dead goat a slap with his blood-stained paw as much as to say, "You weren't worth the fight, but I won you just the same." Soon he too sank down and began to lick his wounds.

During the titanic struggle neither boy had moved or spoken, except at the first knockdown. Thereafter the combat had been too awesome, too gruesome, to be viewed merely as some lighter conflict of the woods. Now that the black had won, the spell was broken, and the boys thought about their own needs.

"Let's give him a shot where it will do the most good," hissed Jake. "He can't attack us here without going clear round those rocks and down into the canyon."

"Not on your life," Jim vehemently disagreed.

"That black is a hero. Why—why, I'd almost as soon shoot myself as shoot him. We don't need to shoot, anyway. We can scare him off without hurting him. It wouldn't be fair to use a gun. I tell you he's a square, hard fighter if there ever was one. But never a black'bear was born, except a mother bear with a cub, that would stand up to a human. Look at this!"

Springing to his feet, Jim let out a war whoop and hurled a rock across the chasm straight at the prostrate bear. Jake hesitated, then quickly joined him in the uproar and rock-hurling. Jumping up, the bear that but a few minutes before had triumphed over an enemy incomparably more dangerous than these two boys, gave one startled look at the yelling, dancing figures, snorted his disgust, and instantly hurried down the shelf. Nor did he show any pride in his retreat. Like a jack rabbit roused from covert in the sagebrush, he galloped along the canyon wall in a clatter of rocks upflung by his flying feet, and was gone.

"Who'd have thought it?" snickered Jake. "Why, that fellow must be the champion runner as well as the champion scrapper of all this country!"

"And he won't be back either," Jim declared as if he knew all about the habits of black bears. "He'll run a mile and tremble every breath he draws. But I'm hungrier than ever. Let's climb over and get some goat steak. I'm so empty I could eat it raw!"

Jim's footgear was fastened on, and the two hastened to where the goats had evidently climbed down the canyon. Neither the descent nor the scaling of the other side to the shelf was especially

difficult, and soon they stood on the field of battle.

They were astonished at the huge carcass of the dead brown bear. Its head seemed almost as big as a barrel. But one look at its gaping jaws was enough to explain the outcome of the battle.

"There's the reason he got licked," said Jim as he pointed to the blackened, broken teeth. "And see his claws. Why, he couldn't even tickle that big black's tough hide! This fellow must have been a hundred years old. Only look at his mangy fur! He's so old that he's lost his hair just like an old man!"

"That's plain enough," Jake agreed; "but what gets me is how that black ever screwed up courage enough to tackle him."

"Lots of things can happen in the woods that people never know anything about. Maybe this is an example. My guess is that some time not long ago this fellow cornered the black and they had a little fight because the black couldn't get away. It's likely he didn't get hurt much then, and maybe he's licked every other black in this neck of the woods. That made him cocky. Then perhaps he was mighty hungry to-day and wanted that goat meat so bad that he risked taking a fall out of this old grand-daddy."

"Sounds reasonable," Jake agreed. "But where are those steaks? Come on and eat."

In no time at all, the steaks were cut out and cleansed in the stream. But frying them was altogether another matter. All they had for fuel were the grass and weeds that could be slowly gathered.

Still, patience will work wonders. With eyes begrimed with smoke, and fingers sore from pulling grass, they managed to warm the meat through. Washing great mouthfuls down with water from the brook, they ate and ate until they could eat no more.

The full meal increased their desire to rest, but they realized that this would never do. For comfort's sake, if not for safety's sake, they must reach timber before night fell. Besides, neither boy was able to forget the importance of making speed towards the land office. That paper in Jim's pocket fairly burned him when he felt any tendency to grow sluggish on the march.

So once again the battlefield of the bears was visited for a supply of meat. While they were thus engaged, Jim worked without his cumbrous sandals for convenience' sake. As he readjusted the birch preliminary to setting out, Jake examined the thickness of the bear's hide.

"Gee, Jim," he called, "this hide would stop a bullet from old Bill's thirty-thirty."

Jim gave a start.

"If that's true, what's to hinder making me some sort of moccasins? That hide even in the raw will shape up better than this bark. Reckon I thought goat and bear furnished nothing but meat because I was so hungry. At that, I must have been a dummy not to think of trying out the bear-hide when it's my own feet that need fixing."

"Think I'll call you Robinson Crusoe, after this," Jake chaffed him.

"Laugh all you want to," Jim told him, bending

over the bear, "but don't laugh so hard that you can't help strip off a piece of this hide. I'm going to take along enough for some extra *pacs*."

Skinning a bear is difficult on account of its great weight, but they managed with little effort to secure enough of the pelt without rolling the bear over. This strip was then flayed of its fat and tissues and a piece about twice as large as Jim's foot was selected for the first moccasin. A slit was cut along each diagonal, and stepping firmly upon the hide, Jim gathered the edges up about his foot. His observant eye told him where to use the knife, and shortly he had so trimmed away the superfluous edges that what was left snugly covered his foot in fashion like a rough *pac*. Lacking string of any kind, he made narrow strips of goat-hide serve as a substitute. Eyelets were pierced with a knife; and the whole was tightly laced together after Jim had shaped three other pieces, using the first as a pattern.

Jim skipped about, genuinely pleased with his handicraft.

"I believe I could make a shirt, or even a whole outfit, if I had to," he told the other.

Jake made a wry face.

"Maybe it's good enough," he agreed, "but that combination surely smells to heaven!"

"Aw, come off!" Jim retorted. "What's a little smell between friends? You'd be glad for 'most any kind of change if you'd had to stumble along in those mud boats of mine. Wrap part of that meat in your blanket. I'll take what's left. Let's hie for the other side of the mountain."

Only a little way down the canyon, the precipitous wall gave way to a slope, steep at first, but soon of gentler grade. Following the compass' pointing they sped along, singing, and chaffing each other, so good did the world seem once more. As they neared the skyline, they encountered many patches of snow that made slower travelling necessary. And they had not reached the mountain-top before swirling clouds closed them in, denser than any fog they had ever seen.

"Make sure we keep heading right," Jake besought the other.

"Never fear about that, old-timer. I know what this fog means. I'm afraid we're in for it. We must be all of two thousand feet above timber line, and it's got me worried. It sure feels like snow. If we run into a blizzard up here, we might as well make our wills. But so long as we can see at all, we'd better keep on plugging straight ahead. Maybe this is just another ridge, we'll soon be dropping downhill again."

There was not a landmark of any kind. So far as they could observe, the mountain summit formed a plateau with no apparent slope that might lead them to the haven of timber. Jim, with head bowed against the biting wind, led the way, now and then glancing at his compass, that he might keep his course. Soon snow began to swirl about them, driven by the mountain gale. But the boys stumbled on, slapping their hands to keep up their circulation. They were scarcely frightened as yet, for their big dinner of goat flesh furnished fuel for the struggle. When one is faint from hunger, muscles

grow most weary; when one is tired, cold is especially felt. But they were not hungry as yet, nor were they especially tired. Still, they were far from feeling at ease, for each knew that a very few miles of this sort of mushing would wear them out. Merely to keep within sight of each other, they were compelled to walk almost within arm's length of one another, so thick were the great flakes of wind-driven snow.

"It's getting pretty bad," Jake at last ventured, forced to speech by his failing heart.

"Don't think about it at all," Jim advised, though his own spirits were getting low. "We're bound to come through. If only we could find timber, we'd be all right."

They began to slip and stumble as the snow increased in depth. Each fresh stumble worked on the boys' courage until they began to wonder whether it might not be best to wrap their heads in the blankets, and thus try to live through the blizzard. But their saner judgment told them that to cease struggling would be suicidal. So on they fought until it seemed they could battle no longer. Little headway was made, for at times the wind raged so violently that it presented as much resistance as some material wall.

"Look at the compass again," Jake besought the other lad. "Either we've lost our bearings, or the wind is changing. It isn't in my face any more."

But Jim had just consulted the compass. They had not lost direction. Instead, the wind itself had veered more into the west, making it far more difficult to follow the course they had planned.

Now Jake began to give in.

"I've got to rest," he moaned. "I can't keep my feet going another step."

"Don't you dare think about resting," Jim savagely answered. "If you stop, I'll go on without you." These were unfriendly words, but Jim was prepared, if it became necessary, to drive his friend on with blows as bitter as his words. "We've lived through worse things than this," he kept repeating to himself. "If we can beat the water, we can beat the wind and the snow."

But deep down in his heart was a growing suspicion that they might not come through alive. This mountain blizzard was like nothing they had ever faced before. On Turnagain Arm they had had their staunch little boat. Crossing the river there had been the raft to which they might cling. Up here there was nothing but themselves and the cold, and the snow, and the biting wind.

CHAPTER XI

CHEATING THE BLIZZARD

As fatigue increased, Jim found himself growing less insistent upon following their outlined course. Along with this yielding, he began to wonder whether it might not be better to find some deep drift, burrow a hole into its depths, and spread out their blankets for a cosy, refreshing sleep until the storm should blow over.

It is characteristic of the exhausted human facing such conditions of storm and cold and fatigue, not to take a long look at the final outcome of such a venture, but to seek only immediate, though but temporary, escape from present suffering. What saved Jim now from this foolish decision was not knowledge that their clothing would be insufficient protection against the deadly frost, and that their snow chamber would probably be a chamber of death. Had there been no driving power except the fear of immediate consequence, Jim would have risked it. But what did keep him on his feet fighting the storm was his determination, that previous conflict and victory had deepened, to get through to the land office for old Bill's sake.

Holding hard to this primary purpose, Jim battled on, both against the storm and to keep Jake moving at his side. Wind and snow drove into their eyes—they could see only a few feet in any

direction—they weakened rapidly. Gradually the gale had its way with them. Probably it was the very violence of the wind that saved their lives. In their blindness the boys could not know that their course led directly along the mountain crest where no shelter existed. And as they weakened, the fury of the gale overcame their strength to resist and bore them rapidly to the left flank. Soon it had forced them off the crest. As a result, it was but a short time until even their benumbed senses told them that they were now drifting downhill.

"We're over the top at last, old fellow," Jim croaked. "Wake up! We'll be in shelter soon. I told you we'd make it if we kept travelling!"

Wheeling still more to their left, the boys endeavoured to quicken their speed, but even the energy that new hope furnished could do but little. They were weary and the snow was almost a foot deep. Somewhere below must lie the haven of the forest, but the way there seemed interminable. The gale still blew with cyclonic violence, the driven snow all but smothered them. Steps again became slower and shorter, less certain. They even began to resent the down pull of the steep grade. Consciousness was slowly losing its keenness. As sure as fate, another mile would have found them sinking to sleep in the snow, if they had not shortly felt themselves entangled with brushwood. In a sort of daze, they felt rather than thought that the forest could be only a short way below, and listlessly pushed their way over and around the obstruction.

Soon they were passing clumps of scrubby trees

but had sense enough still left to know that these would afford no protection. Perhaps they did not recognize these mounds and pinnacles of snow as trees, for not a sign of branches could be seen through the mantling of white. They must have passed many possible refuges before they brought up at last against what seemed like a wall of snow. Jim was groping along this wall for a way around when, without warning, his searching hand dislodged a cascade of snow from the branches of a tree, and the boy knew that here was a means of salvation.

"Jake, Jake!" Jim feebly shouted. "We can burrow in here and make a fire. Come to life! We're all right at last."

The tree against which they had drifted was a spruce with its lower branches weighted to the ground by loads of snow. The very lowest limbs were dead, cut off from the air and light, as they had been, by higher branches that formed a close canopy all about. Roused from stupor, the boys side by side began to burrow through the wall of snow, tight packed against its support of green. Soon they found themselves entangled with the dry limbs. About the tree-trunk they could discern a snowless space quite ten feet in diameter, with the tree-trunk at its centre. To give themselves room Jake, with fingers that uncertainly gripped his axe, began to slash away the dead limbs. Soon they had cleared sufficient area inside their forest refuge to be able to move about freely on the soft, dry needles deposited year after year as the seasons rolled by. Here at last they had found security.

Not one gust of wind broke through the walls of their unique shelter. But outside, the storm was still rampant, seeming to increase in violence because cheated of its prey.

Their clothing and footgear were covered with snow. A fire was supremely necessary, and plentiful fuel was provided by the dry branches that had been lopped off. Carefully scraping a space clear of the needles, that would be like so much tinder, they made their fire. At first the smoke all but suffocated them. But as the fire gathered headway it created a strong draft that swirled the choking vapour upward through the limbs. Crouching there before the flames, they fairly saturated themselves with the life-giving heat, all the time solicitous that the fire should not reach the branches above, or the needles below. Luckily not a finger or toe had been frozen and the pain of thawing members was not theirs.

"We can spend a week here if we have to," said Jake, regaining his spirits. "I'm sorry I sort of funkyed out back there."

"Nobody funkyed it. That wind and snow were enough to stop a train. If we both hadn't kept on—well, there would be a cute little mound of snow, perhaps two of them, back there somewhere. But we won't have to spend a week here. It's too early in the season for a storm to last that long. Maybe it will be over in just a few hours. Let's hope for the best; if the snow isn't too deep, we'll be down in real country this time to-morrow, and probably we'll find it's still summer."

"At least we'll be here overnight, and we've

got to have more firewood. I'll mosey out after some."

"I wanted to get dry as soon as I could," Jim answered; "but I guess it's best to rustle the fuel first. We'll have everything we need then and can hole up for the night. While we're out, we'd better pile some more brush around the sides to make it warmer. Come on, but don't wander off. I imagine we can find plenty of stuff right close by."

The storm did not seem so furious to the two as they emerged from their retreat. Probably their frightened imagination no longer multiplied its real intensity; but as it was, they were glad to re-enter their refuge from the storm when their double task had been completed. Armfuls of dry wood had been chopped from near-by trees and heaped within. On the windward side they had built up the wall of downhanging branches until no wind could enter in. They felt themselves snug and comfortable; above all, they were safe.

It was not yet evening, but the lads were hungry, and thirsty too. Snow was quickly melted in the skillet and as rapidly cooled. The taste was not all that could be desired, but it was drinkable. Then came goat steaks. How their mouths watered as the fragrant incense filled the enclosure. And how they did eat! When they could down no more, the skillet was washed with snow water, using earth and needles for soap; and a supply of drinking water provided for the night or until it should freeze.

Then, warmed and contented, they spread their blankets on the soft cushion of needles and regaled

each other with thoughts that had been theirs while fighting the storm. They were frank and honest with each other; and Jake was surprised to learn that his determined friend had been about to quit. He felt a little contempt for his own weakness, but he was honest enough to confess that if he had been left to himself he would have surrendered to the storm before shelter was reached. Tiring of this conversation about past happenings, they turned to the future. So far as they could estimate, they had come about thirty miles. They felt themselves conservative in this opinion, although they admitted that crossing the river had taken considerable time, and that not much speed had been made in climbing hills. The map, even if it had not been ruined by water, would have been no aid in orienting their present position.

Jim was optimistic.

"We ought to be a third of the way through if we didn't get too far off our course this afternoon. It may take us four days more, but once we're at Seward it will be smooth sailing. We have plenty of money to hire a boat for the run to Valdez, and once there, or even from Seward, we can cable for more if we need it. But do you know, Jake, I haven't taken a peep at that location since we left Smoky Valley; let's take a squint at it now."

The boy unfolded the protected paper that he carried tightly buttoned inside his breast pocket. "What if we should lose this?" he queried. "All this mushing would be for nothing. What do you say if we commit the whole thing to memory?"

So in the firelight, taking turns, they worked

over Laughlin's description of the boundary lines until they both had it letter-perfect.

"Every stop we'll check up on this," declared Jim, "so that if anything happens to the paper itself we'll know just how to describe the claims. I'd never forgive myself, if we pulled through but failed to make proper entry."

"I couldn't look old Bill in the face if that should happen," Jake said with much emphasis. "I wonder what he'd say if he could see us now? Do you reckon he'd think his teaching this summer had been wasted?"

"Don't go to whistling yet," Jim warned him. "We're still in the woods. Just listen to that wind howling!"

Outside the whole forest seemed to groan as great branches rubbed each other, harried by the bitter wind.

"Aw, you make me tired," Jake answered complacently, as he stirred their fire. "We've licked everything so far to a frazzle. What's the gain in borrowing trouble?"

"Hope you're dead right, son," said Jim with a superior air. "But how about a little snooze for the good of our souls? When we start mushing tomorrow we'll find our work cut out for us."

"Now you're shouting!" exclaimed the other. "That's the best idea yet. Let's fix things up." Yet he couldn't resist a dig at the other. "Careful where you hang your shoes, Jim."

Jim had the grace to blush. "That was on me, sure enough. But don't you forget I have a reserve supply for us both."

Some time was devoted to arranging their fuel for the night just where it would be convenient. Their couch was smoothed, and blankets arranged where they would be safe from the fire. Footgear was suspended from a branch where it would dry before morning. At first they could not decide whether to stand watch so as to preserve the fire, but Jake expressed the common-sense view of that necessity. "If we get cold, we'll wake up and put on a few more sticks. If the fire goes out, with wood and matches handy, we can start another in little time. And there you are."

"All right, but don't put on too much fuel. We don't want to lose our happy home on a night like this."

In the best of spirits, they turned in to sleep the slumber of the tired but well-fed boy. Soothed by the wind, with the closing of their eyes, they at once drifted into oblivion. Jim could not believe it was morning when he awoke with a shiver. Rising on his elbow, he looked towards the fire. Only dead embers greeted him. Giving the blanket covering a yank, he sprang to his feet.

"Hi, fellow, it's time we were on our way," he shouted at his blissfully sleeping friend. "Hit the deck! You're not hibernating like a bear. You can't sleep till noon. Let's rustle some grub and be off. The storm's over, and all we have to do is to plough through a foot or two of the beautiful. Roll out, my lad, roll out!"

Jim's cheerfulness was contagious. The boys shouted and sang and laughed as they drew on their gear, though all the while they shivered so

vigorously that they could hardly guide laces through eyelets. A quickly kindled fire soon drove out the cold, and belts soon grew tight from bounteous paddings of goat meat.

"This stuff tastes just as good as it did last night," Jim uttered between mouthfuls, or rather with his mouth quite full. "I wonder if we will tire of this diet."

"You'll eat it for quite a spell yet unless we find better hunting. And besides, it's not every day that a bear will bring down your game for you!"

Before resuming their packs, they rehearsed the contents of their precious paper. Neither made a slip.

"Let's burn the paper," said Jim grandly; "it's useless."

"Might as well; save carrying it," answered Jake with his grin.

But the paper was carefully stowed away and buttoned securely in its customary resting-place before they started out, after consulting the friendly compass.

Snow was too deep for swift walking, but in the forest there were no heavy drifts that added to the difficulty. Moreover, the descent was very abrupt; and in two hours they found the snow rapidly decreasing in depth. Another half-hour saw them leave the snow-belt entirely behind.

"Funny the difference a few hundred feet makes in climate when it's a case of up and down," Jake observed because of the sudden transformation.

Occasionally they caught glimpses of the lower country, and these brief glimpses made them

certain that soon they would reach an area much resembling the park country of their own West. But the forest growth about them was so dense that no comprehensive estimate of the farther terrain ahead could be made. For all they knew there might remain several ranges yet to be climbed, or the valley just ahead might eventually fall away to the sea.

Of one thing they were certain—somewhere to their front, and not more than seventy-five miles distant, lay the port where their long mush would find its end. Mountain ridges and valley depths that might lie between them and this goal must be accepted as a matter of course; it was all part of their day's work. Each step although it took them farther into the unknown, was nevertheless so much gained in the right direction. Because they had achieved this philosophy of the true musher, miles sped rapidly by, or at least the passing hours did not seem too long. They were not impatient, for they well realized there was no means by which they might increase their rate of progress. Their only problem was to keep on going. The rest would take care of itself. And so, mentally relaxed and likewise soothed by their expenditure of physical energy, they plodded along in a humour that was almost blithe.

The sun had not yet reached meridian when, emerging from the forest proper, they found themselves on grassy slopes that rolled away in ever-descending waves for many miles to their front. Towards the west the valley lost itself in the distance; to the east it towered up into mountains far

higher than any they had scaled. At what they estimated was a full two hours' walk, the valley green was displaced by a stone-coloured flat that continued as far as they could see. Its centre was riven by a milk-coloured stream that in many places divided into numerous channels, with banks dotted by willow growth. The question with the boys was whether they should march directly across the valley or follow the line indicated by the compass.

"If we shoot straight across," was Jake's opinion, "we will get past the water all the sooner."

"Maybe we will and maybe we won't. This looks to me like one of those glacial streams we've heard the old-timers talk about. We're too far away to make certain, but I'm pretty' positive that the reason we can't see any grass out there is because we're looking at gravel bars formed by overflows in hot weather. Those little streams are of course fordable; but if we head directly across, by the time we got to the main channel we would find it bank-full. On the other hand, if we 'kittercorner' through the low ground we won't reach the big river until it's time to camp."

Jim's speech was rather pedantic but well grounded. During long, hot days the sun pours its rays upon the glaciers, causing much melting of the ice. As the hours pass, the melt seeps through the ice-bed and gradually drains into various channels. Rapidly increasing in volume throughout the hours of sunshine, the channels again diminish during the cold night. As a result, what may have been a rushing river at nightfall, by nine or ten

o'clock in the morning dwindles to a babbling brook. Jim had become acquainted with this daily phenomenon through hearsay, and he therefore planned to take advantage of the morning hour to effect a crossing. Meanwhile, they could save time by travelling the direct line of their march.

For dinner they ate their goat flesh by a limpid little stream. It was not altogether pleasing to their taste and they experienced a yearning for bread. But they had no other food, for they still thought it wise to save the remains of the bacon to cook with less fatty food than the goat meat. There was, of course, the tea; but with only the skillet as a container, they did not bother to add its salty taste to their monotonous ration.

Resuming their march, they found that the grasslands, which had looked so inviting at a distance, were much broken up by former glacial channels. Rocks, large and small, had been rolled down from the glacier by these torrential streams; and over these rocks, concealed as they were by the tall grass, they occasionally stumbled. The first actual stream was crossed dry shod by hopping from stone to stone. The water was undrinkable owing to its muddiness. So heavy was its content of silt that the colour was slaty grey; where there was but little current, and no wind to ripple the surface, the stream resembled a thick grey syrup more than it did a channel of water.

"I never saw such funny-looking stuff," said Jake in disgust. "It's neither mud nor water."

"It isn't mud as we know it," answered his more learned friend. "It's rock freshly ground up by the

ice. I used to wonder when I read about how the glaciers could wear down big mountains. But when I see this thick stuff, and think that for ages thousands of streams have been carrying away all this pulverized rock, I wonder that any mountains are left."

"That's easy," the matter-of-fact Jake explained. "Take a look round! There's no end of mountains, but not many glaciers, so far as I can see!"

"Read up on the Ice Age," Jim responded, rather provoked, "and then you'll know what I'm talking about."

But Jim's critical speech failed to rouse the other's ire. He changed the subject by inviting attention to signs of life about them. The silt-covered bars were thickly tracked by webbed feet, and grey feathers were everywhere.

"Must be great hunting some time in the year," he conjectured. "And listen!" he hissed rather than spoke the words "Don't you hear that squawking?"

Jim became all ears. Faintly but distinctly he caught the honking of some far-off goose.

"Better take a look at the rifle," he suggested; "we're apt to run across something—this is goose country. Gee! but I'd like to get away from that everlasting goat!"

As the boys march'd on, the honking became louder, yet no trace of geese themselves was seen until late in the afternoon. Then far away, so distant that they realized their projected line of travel would not pass beneath, they discerned wheeling lines athwart the sky that marked columns of

flying water-fowl. Encouraged by the sight, they maintained a still sharper scrutiny of the ground ahead. But they were unprepared when, so strong and clear that the clarion notes made them jump, a gander sounded his challenge to the ruler of some other flock, or perhaps his emphatic command to his own followers.

"They must be hidden in those willows right ahead," breathed Jake. "They're our meat if we can close in on them."

Stalking geese on a gravel flat requires the patience and stealth of an aborigine. And now that the game was definitely located, the boys became real hunters, worming their way forward, sometimes crawling, sometimes in a stooping position, sometimes walking erect. It all depended on their cover. As they neared the willows whence the call had sounded, they became even more snake-like as, without raising their heads, they wriggled ahead until they could peer through the brush.

At least twenty geese were making themselves thoroughly at ease on a muddy bar, with no sense alive to danger. After their custom, a single old fellow standing on one leg was doing sentry duty, head and neck stretched out in a posture of pretended alertness. All the rest were either waddling about, preening their feathers and softly communing with each other, or else sound asleep. The distance was not more than forty yards.

The boys looked at each other with something like jealousy in their gaze. Who would do the shooting? Jake settled the matter by gravely pinching a blade of grass in two and extending the two sec-

tions, partly concealed, towards his companion. Jim recognized his motive and as gravely made his choice. He lost; and Jake, grinning triumphantly, tapped himself on the chest. Then, steadying his piece across a convenient rock, he aimed long and carefully at the heedless sentinel and squeezed the trigger. The crack of the rifle was lost in the roar of wings. For a moment the boys did not know whether the bullet had struck home. But it had. The big gander was flopping along the ground, not dead by any means, but unable to launch himself into the air. With a whoop they rushed upon him; with a hiss, and one unbroken wing raised to strike, the gander faced their attack. Jake levelled his gun for another shot, but Jim had already picked up a piece of driftwood, and with this the goose was killed.

The lads were jubilant.

"It's a change for supper; and oh, what a change!" Jake almost sang the words.

"Better save your breath," the other bade him. "We've got to carry this fellow to the river, and he's no light weight."

Bearing the goose, they again proceeded, crossing stream after stream with comparative ease. They reached the main channel much sooner than anticipated and found it unfordable, just as they had feared. There was nothing to do but pitch camp, and this routine was somewhat difficult owing to lack of suitable material. Still, a shelter of sorts was built with what could be found, and a bed made of dry grass.

Then came an attempt to pluck the goose, which

proved a complete failure; they were forced to skin him instead. Greater than the difficulty of dressing the bird was the trouble experienced in finding clean water. There was water everywhere, yet not a drop fit to drink or even to wash the messy meat. A thorough and extended search finally disclosed a pool somewhat stagnant, but nevertheless with silt all settled to the bottom. This had to serve for both culinary and drinking purposes, much to their disgust. Acquaintance with kitchen problems acquired that summer under the tutelage of old Bill prompted them first to parboil the bird before they fried the pieces that they had selected for supper and breakfast. When these choice bits were pronounced cooked to a turn, they were laid on hot stones by the fire, and the skillet made to do duty as a teapot. But the goose that smelled so delicious, and was browned to such a nice turn, was tough! Indeed, tough would not describe its stringy muscles. They were as unyielding to the boys' teeth as so much rubber.

"If I had done the shooting, I would have picked out that nice young one in the centre," Jim said slyly.

"Uh-huh?" Jake shot back. "I suppose you'd have counted the rings on his horns and inspected the teeth, so as to be sure, wouldn't you?"

CHAPTER XII

THE UPPERCUT

"SHE'LL still be quite a stream when she reaches her lowest," Jake said as they watched the murky waters in the main channel sweep by. "This looks like a perfectly level flat, but just watch that water roll! If we once get off our feet, it'll be good night for us! I bet there's a pound of silt in every quart of water. If we go under, that mud will fill our hair and ears and nose and pockets and clothes and weight us down so we couldn't stand up even on dry land!"

"We don't need to wear our clothes," Jim answered. "They've got buttons on, you know."

"Sure thing, but how long would we last in this country without clothes? There's more chance of losing your clothes when you carry them in a bundle, than there is of drowning when your clothes are on you. I reckon I'd just as soon drown in my clothes and have it over with as I would linger on with mosquito poison for a week or so!"

"So would I," Jim answered. "But who's going to be drowned? We've beat the game so far, and we can keep it up a while longer."

"I'm not scared—you needn't think that," tartly shot back Jake. "But I am just a little fed up with taking too many chances."

"Oh, well, we've got to take a chance now and

then," Jim told him. "When you don't know what's ahead of you, everything's a chance. Question with me is what's the safest way to get across, all things considered. We've got to get across—we can't sit here waiting for a miracle. How about finding a good big rock to carry on our shoulders so as to hold us down against the current?"

"Nix on that for me—even if old Bill did say it was a pretty good way to make a crossing. All I can say is that if you do go down, the rock won't help a bit. That way might do if there were a lot of big huskies along to help out if you slipped. But it won't do for us!"

"I'm with you on that," Jim said. He realized that Jake was a little upset, but believed he would overcome his fears if he were led to select the method of crossing.

"How about finding some poles to brace ourselves with?" Jake questioned. "Seems to me we could sort of feel our way along too."

"Much better than the rock ballast," Jim agreed. "Still, I think we ought to stick together if we can. Besides, there's the axe and the rifle and what-have-you. If we tie that bundle to us and anything happens, we might be all tangled up at the wrong time! What I'm wondering is whether we can combine the ideas."

"We certainly can if we can find the right-sized timber. We can fasten our stuff to the log, you can get under one end and I'll get under the other, and there we are. Then we can cut a couple of these willows for poles. What do you think of that?"

"A mighty good scheme, and we'll do it," Jim

soberly assented. He was chuckling inside, for, all unknowingly, Jake had been led to propose a plan employing the very means Jim had already determined to adopt. In addition, Jake's morale was considerably improved.

There was nothing novel or untried in the proposals Jake had made. They embraced the methods sourdoughs regularly employ on such occasions, the particular method adopted depending on conditions. The boys had repeatedly heard of such crossings and of one other method as well. If the material for a raft be easily available, rafting affords the best means. But on these glacial streams down on the flats, logs are not always available, as happened in this case.

If there had been no current to complicate the problem, the boys could have ventured the ford whenever and wherever the depth was a few inches less than their own height. But in glacial streams little current means deep water; where the water is shallow, the current is dangerously swift. So treacherous may be the stream in these latter places it is exceedingly risky to venture fording where the water reaches above the knees; and if it reaches towards the thigh, a powerful current will infallibly sweep an unwary musher off his feet. All this the boys knew, and this knowledge made them cautious.

Perhaps if the river had been narrower the two boys would have been less uneasy. Or it may have been that recollection of their previous narrow escapes worked upon their fears, in spite of their courageous hearts. But whatever the reason, they almost dreaded the hour of crossing. Came the

time, however, when a start must be ventured; so, shouldering their log with its burden of equipment, they reluctantly entered the stream.

They found the bottom of the river, rock-covered and slippery from accumulated slime. Up to knee-depth, they encountered nothing to make them fearful of the result. Beyond this point, however, each step they advanced revealed how difficult it was to set their feet just where they wished; the current, like a rod in its effect, kept thrusting their lower limbs downstream. It was only a foretaste of what lay in store, for as they progressed the depth increased. As a result, the current seemed to gather power, and their slow steps became even more hesitant and uncertain. The real cause lay not in the increase of the current itself, but in the fact that it had more body area against which to push; at the same time, they themselves became more buoyant as they became more and more submerged.

Despite their best efforts, they were forced diagonally downstream. They rather welcomed this effect, for apparently it made struggling against the current somewhat easier. Though this might have been the seeming result, they should have recognized that they were submitting to the sweep of the water. But on they slowly pushed, confidence mounting as no disaster overtook them. No doubt their successful progress made them less cautious; and before he was aware, Jim, who was in the lead, began to flounder. He sought to steady himself and momentarily succeeded. Breathing a sigh of relief, he murmured, "Close call, that time——"; what

he meant to add was stifled by silt-filled water. What caused his downfall he never knew. A boulder may have rolled against his staff; he may have stepped upon some rock that slipped beneath his feet; the bottom itself may suddenly have dropped away. Whatever the cause, the result was the same—he went down and under, dragging Jake along.

It may be that if the boys had been more circumspect in selecting the site of their ford they would have met no misadventure. However, their ducking and fright constituted all the real damage. For a few seconds they were rolled over and over, to have hair and clothing and baggage filled with silt. But almost as quickly as they had been submerged they found themselves able to regain their footing, still clutching their log, on a bar that extended to the farther bank. A more experienced musher would have discovered the existence of this bar or shallow, and would at the very beginning have headed straight for it. As it was, the bar doubtless saved the lives of the boys, who now sputtered and coughed, and blinked the slime from their eyes, but wasted no time in wading to dry land. Here they wrung out their clothing and blankets, but made no attempt to dry either; before this could be done a stream of clear water must be found to rinse out the silt. The sun was hot, and they regarded their damp garments but lightly; chief concern was for the blankets, which actually weighed several pounds more, and so increased the labour of packing.

As they dried off, the boys presented a ludicrous appearance. Hands and face and clothing took on

the shade of the silty water. So heavy and complete was this deposit of colouring matter that they looked as if they had been painted a dirty grey.

"Reckon we'll have to take a bath the first chance that comes our way, whether we wish to or not," Jim said, with a grimace directed at the mud and not at the bath. "These blankets will have to be washed and dried too, if we don't want to be choked to death to-night with dust. And say, old man, just at present you look like a painted savage on the warpath."

"You're nothing to enter in a beauty show yourself," answered Jake. "When you want to take a plunge into such stuff as that in the future, kindly don't imagine I wish to join you. At least give me a chance to refuse."

"I did insist on your coming along, didn't I?" chuckled Jim. "It was some header sure enough, but the whole thing was over so quick. I didn't have time to enjoy the swim, such as it was. And really, if that mud had been thicker, I don't believe we'd have gone clear under!"

"I went deep enough and hard enough to suit me," ruefully replied the other, as he rubbed a sore spot on his head. "I think I must have busted the biggest rock on the bottom, the way my head feels."

It was much to their credit that they regarded their ducking so lightly, for each one could recall the names of Alaskans whose lives had been forfeited to glacial streams. Perhaps they had become so inured to hardships of the trail, that accidents which would have seemed appalling in civilized communities were regarded altogether too lightly.

They had reached the point where they had little to worry about if only they could come through alive.

At the first available stream they threw off packs and washed their scanty possessions. Even their rifle was plunged about in the clear water to clean the bore and action, for they felt they could combat rust easier than the hampering silt. They took their own bath and found the water intensely cold.

"F-f-funny this seems so cold to bathe in," Jake snivered as he splashed about. "I thought it was chilly when we got wet the other day; and it was cold when we got dumped this morning. But this stuff is like ice. How come?"

Jim's only answer was the advice to hustle through with the bath and get out on the warm bank. Jake ought to have known that all such streams carried water that was freshly melted ice.

Vigorous rubbing with their damp and only towel accomplished little by way of drying them off, but what moisture was left rapidly vaporized as they tore about the grass like wild men. After that, garments were donned by the fire and all speed possible was made in drying their blankets. These they turned again and again, almost scorching them in their haste, so closely did they crowd them to the flames. By the middle of the afternoon they were once more on their way, clean, dry, and fed. In the big valley it was easy to pick up a landmark pointed out by the compass as their objective; and towards this they tramped, ready for any eventuality. For

five hours they trekked on with hardly a resting period and then pitched camp.

The site faced a shallow lake only a few acres in extent. Rushes grew thickly on its margin; and farther out there were many round domes of brush and grass, the abodes either of muskrat or beaver. For some reason these were now abandoned. The Indians may have trapped them out, or some pestilence peculiar to the animals swept them off. For a mile back the boys had been tramping through tall grass, and this grass reached all about them to the water's edge. Scarce a week before, this heavy grass had been fresh and green, but already it was brown, its yearly course quite completed. All in all, they were camped in a lonely, unattractive spot. The loneliness affected them as they sat about their evening fire. Conversation lagged. They were about to seek their bed when, without their being aware of his nearness, a Siwash approached on almost silent feet and stood behind them.

The first notice of his presence was an odour of the smoked salmon upon which he subsisted, an odour from which the genuine Siwash is never free. The boys glanced up inquiringly as the stench reached their nostrils, to see the native eyeing them curiously. He was a distressing-looking specimen dressed in the ragged, cast-off garments of some white man. So far as they could observe, he was quite unarmed, but there was a lurking, sinister air about the fellow that they little liked. This aversion increased as the man, without a word, began to finger their poor possessions, shaking out the blankets as if to estimate their quality. The axe,

too, was thumbed to test its keenness, but it was quickly laid down, for the little rifle attracted his attention. The boys had withdrawn the shells from it, and the curious Siwash, who evidently understood the mechanism of such a weapon, worked the action back and forth, aiming the piece and snapping the trigger. Once more sizing up the silent boys, who had in no way interrupted his examination of their property, he gave a grunt and, with the rifle in hand, started away.

"Hey, you drop that gun!" shouted Jim, springing to his feet.

But the Indian kept on going. Evidently he fancied the little rifle and intended to make it his own. He had probably scouted the camp before venturing near, and having discovered the absence of men, believed the boys would make no resistance. He was a badly deluded Indian—he didn't know these particular boys.

"Drop that gun and be quick about it," roared Jim. "You can't make off with anything of ours like that!"

But the Siwash, without recognizing any property rights, betrayed no alarm by hastening his retreat. He fairly swaggered as he walked away, apparently despising anything the boy might do. Without a moment's hesitation, Jim sprang in front of him and seized the gun. Although the native was little larger than the other, he evidently supposed he could overawe Jim by a show of violence. He gave the gun a twist to wrench it clear from the boy's clutching fingers. Failing to gain his object, he drew back his arm to threaten. Jim seized his

opportunity to give the disputed weapon a wrench, and then leaped back with the gun in his possession.

The enraged Siwash, actuated by desire and with fighting spirit roused, sprang at Jim, grunting out words of anger, meaningless to the boy. Round and round they whirled, the boy trying to retain the gun and fight the savage off as best he could.

All this while, Jake had been hovering about, uncertain how to give most effective aid. He knew himself to be physically a better man than his friend, but he stayed clear of the combat until circumstances pointed out his course. Suddenly Jim either slipped or was thrown to the ground, and dropped the gun as he fell. The Indian pulled clear and then bent over to pick up the rifle. He believed that his battle and prize were both won.

Here he made a profound mistake. For as he bent over, Jake seized him by the collar, and jerked with such good will that the Siwash was yanked upright, kept on going and landed on his back. He rose with flashing eye and rushed at the boy who had thus unexpectedly bested him. Knowing nothing of fist fighting, he closed in wide open. The combat ended there. Jake, a pretty fair exponent of the art of self-defence, brought a fist up from the ground that landed square on the chin of the lunging, crouching Siwash. It stopped him dead. When he went down, his head flailed the ground sooner than his shoulders. Jake's uppercut had lifted him right off his feet!

It was an unqualified knock-out. Jim, a heavy club in hand, stared from the fallen Indian to his victorious comrade.

"Talk about your haymakers!" he yelled; "that was the 'lallapalooza' of them all!"

"Out for keeps, isn't he?" grinned Jake as he rubbed his barked knuckles. "When he comes to, let's run him over the hill. I'll get another club."

The Siwash soon rose to stand on wobbly feet. When he recovered sufficiently to realize the situation, he did not hesitate about leaving that vicinity. The boys, with clubs raised to reinforce their demands, were on either hand, and as he started they prodded him viciously. .

"Git! Git! you thieving hound!" shouted one with a punch to emphasize his words

"Beat it while the beating's good!" yelled the other with another jab in the seat of the Indian's trousers.

And the Indian beat it. What is more, he kept on beating it. The last the boys saw of him, he was still running strong with never a backward look.

"By the way he's started out, that baby will keep on going until he's found home and mother," chuckled Jim.

There was something funny about the whole affair, and no wonder they enjoyed the outcome. But as their thrills lessened they became uneasy. Of course they had heard that these people were inoffensive and even without spirit to seek revenge. Still, it was quite possible that this native might belong to a camp near by where by means of some artfully contrived tale he could enlist several friends for a reprisal. His offensive conduct proved him an unusual character, and what further mischief he might attempt remained to be seen. But

after considering ways and means of resistance should a concerted attack be made, the boys decided that the best plan was to get some sleep before any fireworks should start.

Jim as usual outlined their programme.

"Let's fix things handy, in case he does return. We'll put our stuff under our heads for pillows. He can't steal them then without awakening us. I'll snooze with the rifle right by my side under the blanket, so as to be ready for him if he gets mean. As for you, you don't need any gun. All you require is that mighty right of yours!"

Jake laughed at the compliment.

"Honest, Jim, I didn't know I was going to let him have it. I just saw him coming for me, and the next thing I knew he was looking at the sky!"

"If that's true, be careful what you do with that fist of yours on purpose! You might tear his head clean off next time."

Such talk restored their cheer temporarily, and they climbed into bed in the best of spirits. But for all their making light of the encounter, sleep would not come so readily as on other nights. No unusual noises of any description alarmed them. Even the wind made no sound as it bowed the tall grass towards the earth; and up above, the stars, scarcely more than arm's length away, twinkled with reassuring light. Yet when they did fall asleep, it was with a prescience of danger. There was a feeling of menace in the very stillness. Something would happen before morning—of this they felt sure.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BEAVER LODGE

NIGHT wore on. Not a wolf howled his challenge to the moon. No beaver's tail slapped the surface of the lake in warning that danger was near. Not even a mink or fisher prowled about, bent on securing food or intent on murder of some helpless creature to satisfy its lust for blood. Nevertheless, the sleepers wakened shortly after midnight, not naturally, as one does from refreshing slumber, but with every nerve tingling. It may be that the sixth sense which so often warns humans of impending peril had been guarding them while they slumbered. Now that peril was imminent, this guardian angel burst across the threshold of consciousness in its final effort to save the boys. Possibly the smoke, as yet thin, was still strong enough to pollute the pure atmosphere of the northland so that even a tired and sleeping boy would sense the change.

Only for a moment did they remain quiescent after waking. Almost instantly they threw back the bed covering to sit bolt upright and stare out of the open side of their shelter. This is what they saw. Only a few rods distant, certainly not more than thirty, a column of fire was sweeping through the tall grass, its flank extending towards the near margin of the lake, its front charging down the slope directly in their face. With a bound they

were out of the lean-to, spurred to action by the unbroken line of flame. If there had been menace in what they saw through the open wall, there was catastrophe in what uninterrupted vision now revealed. Far down the slope which they had tramped the night before, another rank of flames came marching on. They turned about, and there another blazing front stretched from that margin of the lake to meet the middle line of fire. They were literally enclosed in a cage whose bars on three sides were made of leaping fire, and on the fourth side by the waters of the lake. With the passing of seconds, three walls of that cage were closing in upon them.

"That Siwash!" shouted Jake. "He's trying to burn us alive!"

Jim, every power sharpened by the imminence of peril, looked coolly about. He instantly realized that escape could not be assured by fleeing past the lake, even though they might possibly get round its rim before the onslaught of the fire reached the shore. He knew that there was neither time nor space to try backfiring. Flames were now so close that the wind fanned their heat quite to where they stood. The fire would soon leap to the clump of scattered trees in which the camp had been pitched. If once the trees themselves burst into flames, even retreating into the shallows of the lake would save the boys but for a time. The heat then would be terrific. It would destroy all life within reach. There was but one way out, so far as Jim could see.

"Grab everything you can carry and follow me,"

he swiftly ordered. "We'll have to take to the lake."

"I-I-I-I can't swim!" Jake groaned. "You go ahead. I can't swim much, I tell you. I-I-I'll have to stay and take it!"

"Stay and take nothing!" Jim fairly hissed the words. "You come along. I'll get you across all right."

They grabbed up blankets and axe and rifle and even their poor provisions. Jim rapidly checked the items and glanced about—not a thing would he leave behind. Then they hastened to the lake and waded out through the rushes. Only a few feet from the shore, they could wade no farther; and already sparks were sailing through the air about them.

"Here, fasten the blankets across my shoulders. I'll swim out to that rat-house. We'll be safe on the other side." As he spoke Jim bent over to facilitate the blankets' adjustment.

"What'll I do when you're gone? I can hardly stand the heat now," Jake moaned.

"Help me get started, I tell you! I'll come back and get you—it won't take but a minute."

Further words were needless. Jake with trembling fingers did as he was told. Then Jim with a few powerful strokes reached the haven of the dome-like nest, and draped the blankets across its farther side.

"Hurry, oh hurry, Jim; I'm burning up!" shrilled Jake.

"Get down under the water, you idiot, and you'll be all right," Jim roared back. "Show some sense

of your own, or I can't save you. You'll be the death of us both!"

But when Jim reached the other's side Jake was still standing not more than waist-deep in water, while cruel brands were hissing all about. He seized the axe from Jake and gave it a toss towards shore. The rifle followed in flight.

"We can pick them up when the fire's over," Jim muttered more to himself than to Jake. "They can't be hurt in the water."

Then in fierce tones he addressed his friend.

"Buck up, man! Do your share, for the sake of us both! It won't be but a moment now until you'll be able to laugh at all this hurry! Keep your arm about my neck just so; don't kick or struggle! Trust me, and before you know it, we'll be out there where the biggest fire on record can't touch us!"

Some share of common sense returned to Jake and he did as he was instructed. Then ensued a short struggle on Jim's part against the drag of the other's weight. He was a powerful swimmer, and made the venture successfully. On the other side of the rat-house, water was shallow enough for them to stand with head and shoulders clear of its surface; from this vantage point they watched the flames devour everything that was inflammable. Their poor lean-to went up almost as if it had been exploded. Red tongues of flame licked the scattered tree-trunks. Sparks and firebrands fell all about the boys and upon their refuge, which soon began to smoke. But they splashed water upon the blankets and the nest and upon themselves; and neither they nor their belongings suffered damage.

The boys were badly chilled when the fire at last died down; only a few pieces of fallen wood still sent up a feeble blaze. The streams that formed the inlet and outlet of the lake, although they were insignificant in size, had with their reinforcements of swampy banks entirely checked the fire at each end of the lake. Soon through the smoke and murk only the blackened shore greeted their gaze.

Then Jim turned and in the half-light looked long and searchingly at his friend.

"Jake," he began coolly, "you faced that Siwash without a quiver. What was the matter with you just now? That fire wasn't nearly so dangerous as that bad Indian."

The other shook his head in perplexity. His panic had gone and real shame for his hysteria was upon him.

"I don't know; honest I don't. I never get afraid if there's something I can do. But I couldn't fight that fire—and I couldn't swim—and I just seemed so sort of helpless; I guess my nerve completely broke."

"There's always something one can do," Jim said philosophically. "A man may be down, but he's never out! You just put that in your pipe and smoke it. But I didn't mean to criticize. I reckon I lost my temper same as you lost your courage, so we're quits. It's time to forget it. Let's clear out of this fire area and find some breakfast. We'll have a good long day before us. Funny I didn't notice that all this happened in the dark. Why, see, it's just a little past daybreak now!"

Jim transported Jake and the blankets to shallow

water, where axe and rifle were picked up. The distance to the end of the lake was soon covered and, having forded the outlet, they set out for a grove of trees a mile or so beyond. Here they breakfasted on the remainder of their meat. They were down to the bottom of their larder—once again it held only a small piece of bacon and some tea.

On the way thither, and during the preparation of the meal, they discussed the probable origin of the fire. All evidence pointed towards a deliberate plan on the part of someone, and all suspicion was directed at the Siwash as the incendiary. Yet they at once abandoned the thought that the Indian would still dog their footsteps. In their opinion, either satisfied with the result of his nefarious attempt, or frightened by the consequences that might attend, he would probably leave the place entirely.

The question of food supply gave them much more concern. They had always heard that this part of Alaska abounded in game both large and small. But as yet, save for the bear and the goat and the geese, nothing had been seen. Where the rabbit ought to have abounded, none had put in an appearance as yet.

"I reckon we'll have to take up fishing again if we expect to eat," was Jake's opinion. "We've got just one scrap of bacon left. That won't go far."

"It won't have to go far," Jim answered confidently. "We can't be more than two days' hard travel from civilization. We can mush that far on an empty stomach."

"Oh, I suppose so, but miles are pretty long when the tummy's empty. But there I go, borrowing trouble again. We can eat when the time comes, if we have to chew on grass salad."

"That's the talk!" cried Jim. "Let's be cheerful while we can. Maybe we'll have cause to mourn in earnest to-morrow."

Their morning journey led them through an extensive area covered with huge blocks of granite, torn by some cataclysm from the mountainside in ages past. The country resembled a vast stone yard, so regular did the shaping of the great blocks appear to be. Off to their right a mountain range reared itself towards the clouds, and they half expected to see the monstrous quarry from which these gigantic slabs had been blasted. But so far as they could determine, although the blocks themselves appeared riven, the mountainside revealed no sign of recent earthquake action. By noontime, or rather hunger-time, they had drawn out of the rock-strewn country, and the way began a rapid climb towards still distant hills. Although they had nothing to eat, they picked out what they thought was the midday hour for a good long rest. Only one rivulet of any size had been crossed, and it was utterly devoid of finny life. They thought much, but spoke little, for both realized that discussing their hunger would only aggravate it.

The afternoon passed slowly. Steps did not altogether drag, but the boys were rather sick at heart when they began their preparations for the night. Many miles had been covered during the long day. If it is true that an army marches on its stomach, it

is equally true that a growing youth feels discouragement most when hunger is gnawing at his vitality. Here too, in this great wilderness, the solitude was all the more depressing because they were unfed. However, they boiled some tea, and in the momentary strength that this draught imparted they scouted about for game. They had some luck on the hunt, for after deliberating over the wisdom and utility of so doing, they shot down a small hawk that had perched itself on a stub to look for its own supper. The bird had that day evidently been feasting on some carrion, for the odour it gave forth as they picked up the body was discouraging.

"I rather stick at swallowing it," said Jim as he frowned his disgust. "I'm no end hungry, but I'll stay hungry a while longer before I'll eat that thing. He'd taste about like he smells!"

"What's to hinder skinning him and hanging him up till morning? We'll be still hungrier then, and maybe we won't notice the smell quite so much. Perhaps the airing will do him good!"

"All right," agreed his friend. "If you'll be the first to eat part of him I'll finish what's left! You skin him, will you? I've got an idea."

Where there were hawks there should be some sort of game, or so Jim believed. Still, he had no good reason for what he was about to do except the urge that anyone has, to try any possibility that may provide a way through difficulty. It might be, he conjectured, that all small game in this area lay hidden by day and travelled at night; if so, he would try to conform. He first cut out a narrow

strip from the goat-skin laces that he had made to fasten his clumsy *pacs* together. This he tied in a slip knot; but the knot belied its name—it refused to slip as readily as Jim demanded. The raw leather had stiffened, and nothing could the boy think of to adapt it to his purpose. Shaking his head, he gave up the effort as useless.

While he squatted on the ground lost in thought, he kept pulling at his heavy breeches as they stretched tight across his knees. Finally he noticed a thread or two had come away in his fingers. As he absent-mindedly stared at this, a sudden smile announced that he had thought of something that might be worked out. Picking up a blanket, he began examining its texture. He pulled away the wool nap, and down underneath he discovered the heavy basket weave that formed a groundwork for the whole.

“Hi, Jake, I’ve found it!” he shouted to the other, who, with turned-up nose, was still engaged in dressing the odoriferous hawk.

“Found what?” Jake called back. “Another gold mine? Pass it up and find some grub!”

Jim made no answer to this sally. With his knife he slit away the ragged selvage from the blanket’s edge, and then proceeded to unravel the yarn that lay packed tightly to its neighbour. Three lengths did he unravel before, feeling satisfied, he again accosted Jake, who had come to watch this peculiar operation.

“This is what I think, old boy, and maybe I’m crazy. It might be possible that there are some rabbits right near here that hole up away from the

hawks in daytime and play about at night. Let's look for a runway and set a snare. It'll work while we sleep. Maybe we'll catch one before morning."

Jake threw cold water on the plan.

"We never had much luck with snares last summer. It takes a Siwash to work that scheme." He had begun to break a little under the strain.

"Nothing wrong about trying, is there? Come on up to that ledge that looks like a stone wall, and let's take a chance on it. Seems to me a good place for rabbits to play about when they want a hole right handy."

"I'd rather rest, but I'll go 'long for company. There's nothing else to do. You keep away from my hands, for they smell like a garbage pail about six weeks old."

The ledge gave evidence of being a rabbit warren. It was shattered by cracks, and the grass about its foot was smoothed down into something like furrows, as if by a small roller. At a certain point these scattered furrows joined together until they became one, and then spread out again. At this junction point was the ideal place for a snare, if only there were rabbits that frequented these trails. No saplings grew nearby to furnish a spring for the trap. This lack was soon supplied by cutting another a short distance away, and thrusting it into the ground about two feet from the trail. With Jake's help, the long yarn was braided into a shorter length, and one end then fastened to the top of the brush. The strength of the string against the elasticity of the bush was then tested, and Jim felt confident the string would stand a strain sufficient

for his purpose, and that the bush would fly back into place with force enough to jerk any rabbit, no matter what its weight, into the air.

A slip knot was next tied so that when a noose about a foot in diameter was formed and its bottom laid across the trail, the little tree would be brought down where its spring would be most effective. Then came the shaping of a trigger with its locks, that must both hold the bush securely and yet be released when some rabbit, on pleasure bent, should hop against it. This took time and patience, but at length the action became so satisfactorily adjusted that when tripped with a stick the noose shot into the air. Three successive trials were made, and each proved successful. The boys now retired downhill to their camp, pleased with their work, but not very hopeful of results. Still, they felt better because they had made the attempt.

When darker shadows fall in the wilderness or anywhere that forms the habitat of wild life, that life begins to emerge from its hiding-place, whatever it may be. The lynx creeps forth from its cavern; the wolves gather for their stalk and run and slaughter of defenceless game; and overhead the owls, both great and small, hover on silent wing in search of quarry. The rabbits, too, delighting more in the moonlight than in the light of day, gather from near and far to frolic in the grass of summer, or snow of winter, as soon as twilight falls. One of these rabbits, hidden all day long from the prying eyes of soaring hawks, now ventured forth near the rock ledge to hop slowly along a nearby trail. Occasionally it stood up straight, erect as

any man, to scan the hillside for possible enemies; then, satisfied, hopped on its way. Down its own particular lane and into the broader avenue it pursued its course. Across the beaten grass, it noted that a twig had fallen since it last had passed that way, but this neither deterred nor frightened it. The rabbit pushed on, against the twig. The next instant something had seized its furry throat. Up the rabbit shot into the air; but not before it had emitted that sharp, high-pitched squeal of fright and agony that is the most piercing sound in all the woods.

Down the hill, in their lean-to, the boys were roused by that shrill cry of keen distress.

"By jingo, Jim, you got him already!" whooped Jake. "Let's go see before he breaks loose."

Shoeless, the lads stumbled up the hill. There in the moonlight, swaying and jerking from the springy sapling, a rabbit dangled, kicking its life away.

"You can have your hawk, I'll take rabbit for mine. And I'll take it right now!" cried Jim as he put the rabbit out of its misery.

"Let's both have the hawk for the first course—it'll serve as a relish! I'm not selfish!" laughed the other.

Although but half-cooked, that rabbit made the most delicious dish the boys had ever tasted. It was a tremendous fellow, and plenty remained after hunger had been satisfied. In fact, what was left had to do for breakfast; for though the trap had been reset before the boys retired a second time, content and happy, no other rabbit obliged them by springing the trigger.

"Something always does turn up to help us," said Jake as they prepared for the morning's tramp. "I believe we were both born lucky."

"Just as one looks at it," answered Jim with much philosophy. "There may be such a thing as luck. But I know a thing or two about luck. If we had sat down and cried beside that first river, we'd be there yet! If we'd given up in the storm, we'd still be there under the snow! And if we hadn't got out to that beaver house, we'd be lying back in the ashes on the lake shore! What we did wasn't much, to be sure. But we did it. That's the main thing, and to my notion, good luck means grabbing your chance. Why, look how far we've come simply because we've taken a step at a time."

"There you go, patting yourself on the back," objected Jake. "I tell you, we've had luck, and worlds of it too. What if our raft hadn't struck shoal water? What if that beaver hadn't put up that house of his? Where would we be now, in spite of all we did? Answer me that, if you can."

"Aw, what's the use of arguing about it? I can use all the luck that comes my way, of course, but I intend to keep on mushing ahead. This trail is altogether too long for comfort. Let's walk and talk, or all the luck in the world won't carry us to the land office. We'll be right here when Gabriel blows his horn!"

For reasons that Nature best knew, no timber intervened between them and the height of land they were about to cross. Fortified by an abundant breakfast, they made good time, up one slope and down another, all the while rising higher and higher.

By ten o'clock they saw one last rolling summit that they must surmount before a new country would be disclosed. It was then that Jake began to sniff the air.

"Seems to me I smell something. What is it? Don't you smell it, too?"

Jim sniffed and sniffed.

"Guess you have a hangover from that hawk you cleaned. Did you sneak out in the night and eat part of it on the sly? Maybe you did, and maybe it's coming up on you!"

"I tell you, I smell water and lots of it!" was the sharp rejoinder.

"Maybe you do, and it's quite likely you do. The valley ahead may have a big river; or there may be a big lake on this very summit. Don't cross either till you have to!"

As they talked and argued, they kept toiling on. They neared the top. One last scramble up a steep ridge, and there far to the right ahead, still miles away, they gazed on what any person who had ever seen old ocean would have pronounced an arm of the sea. The boys screamed and yelled and hugged each other in delight. The joy that had gripped Xenophon and his fellow Greeks when, during their long retreat, they first glimpsed the waters of the sea, was theirs. They threw off packs to study the landscape before them.

"That can only be the end of Resurrection Bay," declared Jim. "Seward is farther on under the mountain. But it's there! We'll make it now, eats or no eats, rivers or no rivers, fire or no fires! What's the best way down? We can throw the compass away!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE LIFE NET OF SPRUCE

OF course Jim had no real intention of throwing the compass away. He was already too experienced a campaigner to think that he could dispense with the help of this faithful guide. Those who have been privileged to travel mountain country off the beaten trails know how deceptive are bird's-eye views afforded by lofty summits. Planed down by the distance, rough terrain presents itself to the eye as smooth and level. Deep gorges and slashes that are in reality almost impassable may be hidden from sight, or appear only as ditches that one can leap across with ease. Often what promises an easy road to lower levels may actually teem with obstacles that are insurmountable. Moreover, when once off the height, unless a traveller has something to direct his steps, he may wander miles from his course, shunted here and there as he will be by unforeseen irregularities in hills and ravines, and by his own desire to find easier going.

It was therefore with compass still in hand that the boys long and earnestly studied the broken landscape before beginning the descent, for below them the whole valley that lies above Resurrection's blue waters lay spread out for their inspection. They finally decided on a course that would bring them out some miles above the bay, which was not

to their liking but which, so far as they could determine, would necessitate little climbing. The general direction of the objective was ascertained; and proceeding along this line as far as they could, they set off down the mountain. If the comparative nearness of the sea did not lend wings to their feet, it did add to their comfort of mind. No boys or even men could have gone through experiences that had been theirs, without a feeling of relief that they were approaching the trail's end.

Then, too, they were not a little pleased with themselves. Equipped with very few aids and only slender resources, they were now on the last lap of a journey to attempt which most men would have required much planning and preparation. Beyond all else, their hearts began to swell with joy, for in a few more days they knew old Bill would be secure in his title to the claims, because they had made good.

It could have been otherwise. They might have started for home by easy stages over the trail to Knik. At Knik they might have secured some skipper to carry them to Seldovia where one of the big steamers would have picked them up. But having engaged on serious business for their old friend's sake, they had not allowed themselves to be thwarted by serious, even dangerous opposition, and the consciousness that they had not betrayed his trust was theirs. To crown it all, they had also a vague awareness that old Bill would not have endorsed the course they themselves believed had been forced upon them, and they were delighted to realize that the result of their efforts now justified their own self-confidence.

Lightness of heart mollified the feeling of fatigue that should have been theirs when approaching darkness called a halt to the day's long tramp. For the last quarter-mile they laboriously descended a precipitous hill, but in the narrow bottom they found things much to their liking.

"This is our last night in camp," Jim said as he stripped off his pack. "Some ways I'm sorry and some ways I'm glad. Anyway, this is a beautiful spot for the last camp-fire. Even the trees look as if they had been trimmed by someone who knew his business."

"I'm more interested in that creek, and not in its good looks either. What I want to know is whether there are any fish in it, and if we can land some for supper. I'd rather have rabbit; but fish will do at a pinch. You make another spear and I'll get the fire going. If we hurry we can set the snare too, before it gets dark." Jake had his hours when all thoughts centred about his appetite, and the beauty of the forest glade had no appeal for him just then.

However, there was much practical wisdom in his suggestion, and Jim forthwith manufactured his spear. Shadows in the brook made it difficult to discover trout with exactitude for easy spearing; but after many failures a supply was secured, and fried with the last of their bacon. Without tarrying to clean the skillet—an operation invariably performed as soon as hunger had been satisfied—they hunted for a likely place to set their snare, but discovered nowhere more promising than a ten-foot gap between two rotten logs. This opening was

narrowed by a barricade of smaller logs, and here the trap was set, with only little hope of being successful.

The next hour about the fire was long remembered. While they reclined in its warmth reviewing their late adventures and planning for the future, an occasional owl would call forth its questioning cry, disturbed by the gleam of their fire. Once they heard the shrill cry of some small animal as it was done to death by a furry marauder. Just before they sought their blankets, they saw two orbs of light back among the trees, that made them feel a little creepy. But good sense told them nothing would disturb them while they slept. And sleep they did until the sun struck through the trees, and jays awoke them by their harsh cries.

To their surprise, the snare had noosed a half-grown rabbit; and this furnished a breakfast when helped out by a fish course of trout fresh from the creek. Both dishes had been broiled upon the coals and when seasoned with salt proved not unappetizing, though badly scorched in spots. Still, taste did not much matter, for they breakfasted in haste, impatient to finish the last miles of the trail. The creek caused little trouble, but the bright light of day revealed that the far side of the valley floor was walled in by a cliff up which no man could climb. Its height was not great, but in places it actually overhung the ground beneath. For several minutes they followed along its foot seeking some way up, but ever the venture looked more than dangerous; it was impossible. When the way began to lead them almost directly opposite to where they wished

to go, they knew that something must be risked. Throwing all caution to the winds, they began a search for handholds that with slow effort might help them to the top.

A route of some promise was at length discovered. The face of the cliff was still almost perpendicular, and the rock was weatherworn; numerous shrubs, some of fairly large dimensions, grew from its cracks. A wiser mountaineer would have rejected the route because of the visible rottenness of the rock; but to the boys, rock was rock, and up they scrambled, having first adjusted their equipment so that both arms should be free. As they steadily mounted higher, the depths below had an unnerving effect; but looking upwards, they concluded that the summit was as easy to reach as a descent to the bottom would be. Shrubs and rocks, that afforded grips for their hands and perches for their feet, were utilized as best they knew how. The climb could not be straight up, for every other step they had to shift to right or left as occasion offered. They soon reached a spot where they had to force passage through the boughs of trees that thrust themselves against the cliff. After this, the way led off to one side for many feet, and when once more they began ascending, only one beautiful spruce with perfect cone-shaped top lay below.

Jim had taken the lead both because of greater natural initiative and also because Jake would rather trust the other's judgment than he would his own. Directly over the last spruce they reached an impasse. More than twenty feet above them, the cliff began to draw back, and judging from the

thick-growing bushes, the route from there on would be comparatively easy. How to cover that twenty feet was a serious question. The rock face at first glance appeared quite bare of aids for hand or feet, and here Jim halted just above his comrade's head, to think things out. At last he had the question settled and called his instructions down to Jake.

"Keep your eye on what I do, and go at things in exactly the same way. It's a long drop to solid ground, old fellow, and we both want to be in Seward to-morrow night. I'm going to chance that piece of shale holding my weight. It looks pretty solid, and I'm willing to risk it. Then I can grab that tree with my hands and pull myself up. It will be a long reach to that next handhold, but I'm good for it, and so are you. I can see a crack just above that I can dig my fingers into; with a little spring I can make that next dead bush. After that, things will be easy. Now watch."

Standing on tiptoe, the boy secured a firm grip on the projecting shale and carefully swung upward. The rock quivered under the strain, but held. Again rising to his feet, he locked a strong grip on a young tree about four inches in diameter that grew directly from the solid wall and almost at right angles to it. It was not much of a task to clamber upon this, but here he had only the smooth wall to lean against. His was a perilous position, but Jim's nerve seldom bothered him, and soon he gripped the next hold. He did not relish the feel of this dead stub, but there was a slight toehold about three feet above the tree and he took the chance. The stub

gave an ominous crack but held. Then, gripping the edges of the shale above the stub, he slowly drew himself up until he could rest his foot upon the stub. From there on, the way was easy. Soon from his secure perch in the brush, he bade Jake come on.

It was difficult to describe Jake's feelings as he watched his comrade claw and clutch and swing his way up the cliff. So long as Jim was immediately in touch with him, he was not especially fearful; for the Polish boy was a good follower, and his friend possessed the knack of inspiring confidence. Having once done a thing, Jake could do it over again; but anything novel created in him a suspicion of his own adequacy to meet trying situations and he was now confronted with a task which he must perform alone, whose outcome was uncertain, and which had been approached so laboriously and fearfully that Jake's courage was hardly equal to the demands made upon him.

When he presently heard Jim's voice announcing that the way was clear for his ascent, Jake's hands and legs refused his bidding. There was also a curious sensation in the pit of his stomach; his breathing was short and rapid; he felt weak and helpless all over. He seemed rooted to the spot.

But Jim kept calling from above: "There's nothing to it, old boy. What I can do, you can do, too. Simply look things over every inch of the way, and before you know it, you'll be right alongside of me. Then we can make tracks together—I can see it's mighty easy from here on."

The boy took a deep breath and reached for that first piece of shale. It felt firm to his touch and he gathered a little courage for the ordeal.

"That's the stuff, old fellow; keep on coming now." Jim's voice soothed and cheered him for the next effort.

To rise to his feet, groping merely against that blank wall with fingers clutching absolutely nothing, was almost beyond his will-power to effect. Still, the next moment he had accomplished it, and his hands convulsively gripped the strong tree. Oh, how good that rough bark felt to his fingers! In haste to bestride the tree, he gave a mighty spring to reinforce the pull of his arms. His effort was successful, but the reaction of his feet against the shale dislodged the poorly anchored shelf; even as he sprang, he felt the whole give way. Of course no harm was done; but cold sweat poured off the boy as imagination pictured what would have happened to him if the rock had torn loose while he was dragging himself upward by its help. He could not restrain himself from seeking sight of the shale as it shattered itself on the ground far below; instead of congratulating himself that he had passed the danger successfully, all he could do was visualize himself lying broken among the rocks. Nor were his nerves quieted by this imagination of his for the task ahead. Yet he had to go on; there was no way back since the ledge had been torn loose.

"Rest just a moment like I did while you're astraddle of that tree," Jim now called down to him.

He knew quite well what the other was passing

through; instead of feeling critical, Jim was all sympathy. Jake sought to steady himself for what remained to be done, and in part succeeded. For when the other again bade him come on, with some assurance he worked himself upright on the narrow footing and gripped the stub above. Perhaps he was now in too big a hurry to get things over. Instead of grasping the stub close to its roots, his hands must have closed about it an inch or so farther out. If he did do this, the additional leverage thus supplied would account for the stub's pulling away from the rock crevice which once held it fast. And this is just what happened. For as Jake gave a preparatory tug to his handhold, the whole thing came away in his grasp. For a moment it was a question whether or not he himself would lose his balance and go crashing to the ground.

The boy was now in a very panic of terror as he pressed face and body against the wall. Jim too was frightened as he saw his comrade isolated first by the fall of the shelf below the tree, and later by the uprooting of the stub. He half expected to witness his friend crash to the valley floor. But as Jake still stood there boring against the cliff, Jim called down not excitedly, but calmly as if nothing had happened, "Reach down to that little rock and get back to the tree."

Jake gave a shuddering gasp and did as he was bidden. But there he was, with no escape below, and no escape above! He was more than fifty feet from the floor of the valley! Jim now thought of assisting his friend from where he himself stood, and looked about for some secure anchor to which he

might attach his blanket, with the intent of making the blanket serve as a lifeline for Jake, since all natural footholds were gone. But he gave it up; the bushes were so small that the resultant risk would be too great. He thought next of getting Jake to tie his own blanket to the tree where he now perched. But the danger here was also forbidding, for the boy might not be able to transfer his hold from clumsy blanket to projecting rock. He then pondered the advisability of climbing to the top and cutting a pole from which some sort of ladder could be made, and let down, up which the other might climb. But he quickly abandoned this idea, for he did not know what might befall Jake in his absence; nor could he discover any means by which the pole ladder might be secured more tightly than a blanket could.

As Jim thought over the tight situation, he noted the bushy spruce just below where Jake cowered. If Jake had the nerve, the thing might be done! At least it was the only way out, and Jim determined to risk the trial.

"Cheer up, Jake. You've got to get down and try some other place. See that tree just below you? It's exactly made for a jump net like firemen use when folks get trapped in a burning building and have to leap from a window. You can drop into its top and then shin down to the ground."

Jake gave an anguished look at the tree. It seemed a long way down to that velvety greenness, and he shook anew in terror of that flight through the air before the spruce would receive him.

"I—I can't do it, Jim. I might bounce off, or crash all the way through to the ground!" he almost whispered.

"It's the only way out," Jim said with a matter-of-fact air. "Besides, you'll soon get so cramped from straddling that tree, you'll be leaving it whether you want to or not! If you deliberately drop, the worst that can happen to you is a few scratches. And it's such a little drop—why, that tree isn't more than five feet below you!"

It was more like ten or twelve, but Jim was seeking to reassure the other.

"I just can't do it, Jim. I just can't," Jake groaned again.

Jim was in a quandary, but he decided to make the best of it and to force an issue.

"All right, then; there's nothing I can do. I'll just have to sit here and stick it out with you till you have to give up and let go! I don't want to do that, you know. You've never quit on me before. Don't quit on me now. At least do it for old Bill's sake! You simply must see this thing through with me."

With these words, Jim disposed himself as carelessly as he could on his own perch to wait the outcome of his reproach and appeal.

For moments Jake continued to crouch on his slender seat. Gradually a sense of shame at his own cowardice took the place of other feelings; he began to shift himself along the tree until almost directly above the centre of the spruce. But when he looked down at the terrifying depths about the tree and

imagined himself bouncing out into space as the strong branches recoiled from his unceremonious drop into their arms, he gave it up and dug his fingers into the rough bark of his perch as if he could never bring himself to dare the awful plunge. Jim watched the shuddering boy below him, but was wise enough to remain silent and let Jake fight out the battle with himself.

By slow degrees Jake stilled the tumult of fear that gripped his vitals, and slowly swung under his support. For a moment or two he dangled at arm's length with feet much more than his own height above the very tip of the spruce; then, drawing a convulsive breath, he steeled himself to let go! The next moment he was buried in the needle-laden boughs, the slender top swaying with the impact of his weight. It was all over! He was still very much alive!

Then he began to laugh in hysterical relief: "Ha ha ha! I'm some flying squirrel—just like a bird, ain't I, Jim?"

"You're an angel without wings. You don't need 'em!" Jim feebly shouted back. Now that the crisis was past he felt his own self growing weak and sick. Instantly he braced to add cheerily, "But if you stay in that top long enough, you'll change into a woodpecker! Shin down that tree—we're wasting time."

"Just as soon as I throw off this pack," Jake as cheerfully answered. His pack was on its way to earth before he finished speaking, and the boy then followed, though more deliberately. On his way down he became smeared with spruce gum, but

apart from a scratch or two, the adhering gum with its black coating of dirt and dust was the only mark that testified to his thrilling experience.

Jim had struggled to the top of the cliff by the time Jake reached the ground, and now shouted, "It's all smooth going up here, but we've got to get together. You keep following along the cliff until you find some place you can climb up. I'll keep even with you up here." His proposal was accepted and carried out; yet it was not until they had gone many hundreds of yards down the valley that Jake found access to the top. Jim was squatting in the grass waiting for him as, puffing and blowing, Jake mounted the cliff. There was hearty admiration in Jim's voice and eyes as he sprang to his feet and greeted his friend.

"Shake, old boy; you're the real article! It took nerve to make that drop."

"Maybe it did, and I'll tell you something else. I don't know how I know it, but never again am I going to play the calf. Something came over me when I found myself safe in that tree. After this, you'll find me busting into anything, no matter what the odds! I'm cured of being scared."

"Aw, forget about being scared. You came through when you had to, and that's all anyone can do," was the hearty rejoinder. They did not discuss the matter further. Each had too healthy a distaste for the whole business.

The rest of the day wore rapidly on. Mile after mile was covered, and for a time the boys thought

they would sleep in Seward that night. However, the distance was greater than it had seemed. They were still above the valley whose seaward end is filed by Resurrection Bay, when they halted for the night.

CHAPTER XV

THE STOLEN PAPER

"I FEEL like building a monument to this old skillet!" said Jim as they finished eating their last meal in the woods. "It surely has done honourable service! And it's still ready for more. But we haven't a shell left for the twenty-two—that rabbit we had for breakfast took a mighty lot of killing—and I'm afraid the rifle itself is ready for the scrap-heap. So is everything else. Just look at the blankets—they're nothing but rags. They have sure been through fire and water. But the skillet, God bless it, is still in the game."

"Why not hang it to a tree as a mark of our last camp?" Jake proposed. "Maybe sometime we'll be mushing through here again, and we'll recognize the place if we see that old veteran."

"All right, we'll do that very thing," Jim agreed. "But how about the blankets? We don't need them any longer, and they're really in terrible shape. Even a Siwash wouldn't want to use them. Let's throw them away."

"We'll travel all the lighter. How about your changing moccasins too, and throwing away those you have on? They've stood the mush pretty well, but they look tough for our grand entry into Seward."

Jim shook his head.

"I'd rather wear the old pair. These have shaped to my feet and are still pretty solid. If I look like you in other respects, and I expect I do, a little matter like shoe *pacs* won't make much difference."

Jake laughed at the thrust.

"I was wondering whether I look as disreputable as you do. Jim, you're a sight! Back home they'd set the dogs and policemen on you if you knocked at somebody's door. I've seen some hoboes in my time, but nary a one so dirty as you!"

"Probably you're telling the truth, but you don't need to feel jealous. Wait till you look into a mirror, and you'll be more than satisfied to travel along with me! I've put out the fire while you've been passing compliments. Come on, fall in line. Shoulder arms!"

Jim picked up the axe and threw it across his shoulder; Jake did the same with the rifle; and off they went with only the clothes they had on, each bearing his weapon.

In two hours they came to a marshy swale across which they struggled with but little regard for the mire. When they at last burst through the final bushes, their eyes fell on a man, alert and fingering a heavy rifle, in posture of ready defence.

"Well, of all the blankety-blank sights I ever did see, you fellows take the cake! I thought a moose or bear was tearing through that brush; and here you are, a couple of kids! Where did you come from?"

"Oh, back there a ways." Jim vaguely waved towards the distant mountains behind him. "Gee, I'm glad to see a trail once more!"

"Back where? Been hunting or prospecting or fishing or what? How long you been in the woods? Did you get lost?" The man's questions came tumbling out in rapid jerks as he surveyed their rough-and-ready appearance.

"Been lost? Humph! I should say not!" Jim shot back at him with equal vehemence. "We've come through from Knik all alone!" His purpose to reveal no more about themselves than was necessary was momentarily forgotten; his pride was offended by the man's supposition that they had been lost.

"From Knik? By way of Sunrise? Then what are you doing off the main trail like this?"

"We never saw Sunrise or Sunset or any other town! We were in too much of a hurry, and came straight across from up near Possession." Jim decided that the man might as well know the main facts of the hard trek now that the cat was partly out of the bag.

"Well, of all the babes in the woods, you fellows are the craziest things I've ever laid eyes on! Come on! Let's mush into town."

The man fairly burst with eagerness to introduce these lads who had braved Kenai Peninsula in such manner, to his friends. He had not a doubt of the truthfulness of Jim's short statement, for the boys surely looked the part. But no further information could he elicit, no matter what questions he asked, beyond ascertaining that they had lived off the country *en route*, and had not found the undertaking extremely difficult. The man knew his Alaska, and realized only too well what hardships the young fellows must have encountered. He was

still all agog with excitement when, absolutely refusing to swagger down Main Street with him while he introduced them to the old-timers, they hastily entered the first hotel they came to.

Its friendly proprietor had no questions to ask, but showed them at once to a scantily furnished room. The boys stopped only long enough to wash face and hands in the earthen washbowl, deferring their bath until they had secured some clean clothing. Not more than ten minutes were spent in the hotel, but when they sallied out little groups of people were already collecting to catch a glimpse of the two adventurers whose arrival had been advertised by their voluble friend of the trail.

"I don't like this at all," Jim told his companion, as one after another approached to shake their hands and slap their backs in hearty congratulation. "If that Dirty Neck is anywhere about and hears that we've made the grade, he'll be laying for us; and up we'll have trouble sure as fate."

To escape further notice, they dodged into the first clothing store they discovered, and made their purchase of complete outfits. Next door was a barber's shop that advertised hot baths. They could hardly wait to get inside. Paying but scanty attention to buttons, their ragged dirty garments were fairly torn off, and into the warm water they plunged. Only those who have been deprived of the pleasure of a warm bath for weeks on end can share the pleasure of Jim and Jake as they soaped and soaked and scrubbed in the hot bath. It seemed that they could not get enough. They called back and forth to each other across the low partitions,

about the blessings of civilization in general, and about baths and restaurants in particular; but all the while they scrubbed and soaped. They had seen plenty of water on their way out—too much water, in fact—but that water had been of icy temperature and from it they had always been glad to escape. This bathtub was different!

"Say, Jake," softly called Jim to the other as they were completing their toilets, "after we've had a haircut, let's go down to the dock and find out about boats, first thing we do."

"You took the words out of my mouth," Jake answered. "What if a steamer should come in to-night—wouldn't that be bully?"

At the dock, disappointment greeted them.

"The *Schley* cleared from here for Seldovia yesterday, and won't be back for three days," they were informed by the agent. "Want a ticket?"

"No-n-no, that is, not just yet," Jim said hesitatingly. "We'll get one later."

Three days were not long to wait. The boys would ordinarily have been quite satisfied to spend the time looking over the town with its curious commingling of the primitive and the sophisticated, had it not been for the uneasiness that always assailed them on meeting with delay. This temporary delay worked upon the boys' feelings as if it presaged some serious obstacle that would have to be overcome. It would be unbearable to lose the chance that belonged to old Bill through some mishap that might occur when they were standing at the very threshold of the land office. That such an outcome might now be threatening was uppermost

in their minds as they left the office and walked about the dock to talk things over.

"Nothing can happen here," Jake exclaimed when the other proposed seeking immediate passage to Valdez by chartered power-boat. "What's the use of spending all that money? And it will be so much more comfortable on the *Schley*. I like the unusual same as you do, but I've had enough of this siwashing to last the rest of my life."

"We'll wait till she comes in," was the conclusion voiced by Jim himself. "I don't like it one bit; but we'll be on our guard so that nobody can help himself to the paper. We'll stick to the centre of town, and even then we won't go out after dark. Nobody dare bother us on the street, I feel sure. Let's forget it for a while. How about celebrating with a real feast?"

They fairly gorged themselves on abundant and well-cooked viands in the best restaurant—locally, "hash house"—that they could find; and then, satisfied completely, they strolled outside to begin inspection of the sights about town. They had already glimpsed its saloons and hotels on their way up that summer, and found not much of interest until they chanced upon a pair of cub bears that thrilled them for a time. It was while they were watching the antics of the cubs, standing to one side of the group about the bears, that a man disengaged himself from the group and addressed the boys without any preamble.

"My name is Guthrie. I just heard that you two had come across country from Knik. I've been expecting my partners in from up there in the

Willow Creek country and they're late for some reason or other. I wonder if you saw them at Knik. One is a big fellow and the other is almost a runt. Their names are Watkins and Crawford. Did you run across them before you left?"

Jim was startled by the abruptness of the man's approach and the directness of his question. Doubtless his mention of the two men whom Jim had last seen as they disappeared down the maw of Turnagain Arm also had an unsettling effect.

But he gave the stranger back stare for stare as he coolly answered, "Why yes, I did see two such persons at Knik. In fact, we ate dinner together." Then, turning to his companion, he added, "Come on, Jake, let's ramble back to the hotel."

The man made a step towards them, then, thinking better of it, once more joined the group about the cubs. Jake gave a glance over his shoulder as the fellow turned away; the instant he did so, he was struck by the man's appearance.

"Look at him, Jim!" he whispered. "That must be Dirty Neck himself! See how his black hair grows clear down inside his collar?"

"I've seen and heard enough. Why, oh, why couldn't we have got into town without meeting that big-mouthed musher? This Dirty Neck will be on our trail now for keeps! He knew we were here before he saw us! He's already planning to do his stuff, since he is sure the others have fallen down."

Rapidly they walked back up the street into the little lobby of their hotel. Here they were once more accosted by an individual much the worse for drink.

" 'Scuse me, 'scuse me," he hiccupped. "I'm not feeling very well—hic——" Here he grabbed a chair for support, but all the while clutched Jake tightly by the arm. " 'Scuse me for butting in. Hic—hic—hic, but you're old man Conover's boy, aren't you?"

He looked appealingly with drunken eyes first at one and then at the other.

"Yes, I am," snapped Jim. "What's wanted?"

" 'Scuse me, 'scuse me—hic—won't you? Your dad and I are old trail partners, don't you know? The name is—hic—Brown. Ever hear your dad speak of Dick Brown?"

"You're not Dick Brown, are you?"

The man solemnly took off his battered hat and made a tipsy curtsy. "That's me very much at your service, gentle—hic—hic—gentlemen!"

He stuck out his hand, which Jim gripped with right good will. Here was a possible friend who might in better moments be worth while. For this Dick Brown—if he was Dick Brown—had figured in many a tale told by Jim's father, and had always shone to good advantage.

"I'm not mining now," he told them with a drunken leer. "I'm fishing the briny deep. If you boys have time—hic—hic—come down to the beach and see me. I'm holed up in the best schooner you ever laid eyes on. Come on down for a visit. I'm pretty sick right now, but I'll be all right in a—hic—in a couple of hours. You'll know my boat. Her name's the *Nancy Belle*. It's—hic—it's in great big letters on the bow. I'll go home now and—hic—sober up. So long!" The man solemnly shook

hands and scraped another bow that almost upset him.

Locked in their room, Jim, with trembling fingers, fumbled in his pocket for their precious paper. But it was there secure as it ever had been. He grinned in relief, for he had half expected to find it vanished through some legerdemain worked by the fearsome Dirty Neck.

"I'm not going to carry this about with me a bit longer," he told Jake. "When we go out for supper, I'm going to hide it under the mattress."

"Best plan all right," Jake agreed. "Let's see if we can still repeat the descriptions." He proceeded to rattle off the few lines while Jim followed him from the paper. Then Jim took his turn and was likewise letter-perfect.

"If it wasn't that we both might lose our memory, I'd tear up the thing right now," Jim commented.

But neither was very much alarmed. They felt safe in the security of the hotel. And the bed with its mattress and springs was such a luxury that they soon dropped off for a nap.

Stamping on the bare floor by other boarders who were returning from their day's labour awakened the boys, but they lay quiet until all sounds had died away. Then they rose and made their toilet. Before they left the room, Jim wadded up the precious paper and deposited it under the very centre of the mattress. "I'll enjoy my supper better if I know that thing's safely tucked away," he said with a sheepish grin.

Well would it have been for the boys could they

have seen through the transom a bearded face that pressed itself close to the glass, its eye on everything they did. But when they opened the door, not a soul did they see in the darkened hall, nor was there anybody in the lobby.

After supper they hurried back and prepared for bed.

"Let's take a look at the paper again," Jake proposed. "I guess I've got it on my mind. I'll sleep better if I'm sure it's safe."

Jim obligingly threw back the mattress. The paper was not there! Thinking it might have fallen through the springs, he got down and looked carelessly under the bed. Then he crawled under the bed and swept every inch of the floor with his two hands. The paper was not there! In a fit of fright, he began at the top cover and shook out the bedding, one piece at a time. The paper was not there!

"Dirty Neck!" hissed Jake. "He's been here!"

"Look again! Help me look—don't stand there like a ninny! Help me look—don't give up yet!"

But the paper was gone for good.

The boys despairingly sank down, one into a chair, the other upon the bed. After all their bitter miles of wilderness and sea, to have this happen when they were rapping upon the very door of the land office was more than they could bear. There were several minutes of this silent hopelessness and despair, then Jim roused to action.

"That fellow will wait for the steamer. We can't afford to wait a second. Let's start right now!" he said fiercely.

"But how?" asked Jake. "How can we start

"We'll find a boat. Come on! I tell you I can't rest a minute! We've got to start!"

"But how? I ask you how?" persisted Jake.

His unimaginative slowness, for once had a sobering effect on his friend.

"We'll—we'll find some boat, I tell you! What was that fellow's name? Oh, yes, Dick Brown. Let's go see Dick Brown and hire him to take us over."

"All right. But just one minute—what yarn will you tell to throw old Dirty Neck off the trail?"

Jim stopped and stared. He himself must be losing his wits. Here was Jake showing a far better grip of the whole situation than he himself had yet displayed. The unusualness of such an occurrence completely brought him to full control of himself and he sat down to think. Shortly he sprang up.

"I have it—we'll tell the landlord that we're going fishing with Brown. He heard Brown ask us to go, and will think nothing about it. We'll tell him we'll be back in plenty of time to catch the steamer. He'll tell the same thing to Dirty Neck if he comes snooping around. We'll fool that sneak, if it's the last thing we do! Come on—it's all settled."

They hastened downstairs and told their story to the landlord. Nor did they offer to pay their bill—that would have been a revelation of their real purpose to Dirty Neck should he discover the fact; they would send the money on when their objective was reached. With the landlord's "Good luck"

ringing in their ears, they almost ran out of the door, and down the street. They easily found the *Nancy Belle*. She was drawn up on the beach, but she was on rollers, ready to be pushed into the sea. Was Dick Brown on board? They scrambled over the bulwark and, knocked violently on the cabin door.

"Hey—don't break that door down! What's wanted?" There was no suggestion of drunkenness about the voice.

"It's Jim Conover. Open up. We want to talk with you."

"Well, well, so it's Conover's kid. Come on down," said the same hearty voice.

The boys almost fell down the little companion-way, and without giving any reason demanded that he take them at once to Valdez.

"What's the rush, what's the rush?" Dick protested. "Let's get some sleep and start in the morning. I'm kindah under the weather, you know."

"We've got to go right this minute. We've got plenty of cash—we'll pay twice what you ask," Jim cried.

"'Tain't the money—I'd do that much for Conover's kid for nothing," Brown declared, moved in spite of himself by Jim's vehemence. "All right. We're off. Lucky I've got plenty of groceries and petrol aboard. Won't take us a day, anyhow. Help me give her a shove, and she'll slide down the skids like greased lightning!"

They were soon under way. Though the man was curious, he asked no impertinent questions

about the sudden demand put upon him. He probably realized it would all come out in due time. In the North, real men learn patience.

It was still early twilight, and the boys stared hard at the receding beach to discover some pursuer. None was in sight, and Jim breathed a sigh of relief. By the time the news of their sudden decision leaked out, they would be well on their way to Valdez. He believed that Dirty Neck would wait at least until the next evening before becoming suspicious—perhaps he would wait a few hours more, for fishermen are often stormbound and remain out longer than they had planned. Then, finding that they had flown, Jim believed, the man would wait for the later but faster steamer because only a few hours at the most could be saved by sailing a small craft across the sound. All in all, the boys had good reasons for congratulating themselves on having made a perfect getaway, and they soon turned to an inspection of the craft itself.

They found the vessel admirably adapted for its purpose. The fish wells were located fore and aft beneath the open deck. The cabin held a collapsible table and small stove. There was one permanent bunk, and they saw where three others could be improvised. Lockers were everywhere. The engine was forward and shut off from the cabin proper by a bulkhead. Nowhere was there much unoccupied space. After their curiosity had been satisfied, the boys offered to take the wheel. They demonstrated their ability to keep her on an assigned course, and Dick, giving them their sailing point, gratefully

turned the steering over to Jake and busied himself with his engine.

Jake was still at the wheel when they entered a narrow strait between high sullen cliffs that mark the entrance to Resurrection Bay. Probably nowhere else in the world is there so picturesque a harbour gate as this, and the boys were duly impressed. The moonlight made these tremendous guardians rise still more grandly towards the heavens, and they felt very small and insignificant as their boat chugged on its way in the shadows. Straight down the middle of the passage Jake held his course until a long stone's throw directly ahead he saw what appeared like a rock rising from the sea. "Should think they'd put a beacon on that reef," he murmured to himself; and "Hey, Dick," he called aloud, "what's this rock doing out in the channel?"

Brown sprang to the pilot's window. "Rock?" he laughed. "Don't you know what that is?"

"Why, it is a rock, isn't it?" asked Jim and Jake in the same breath.

"Hold straight for it and see what happens," Dick bade the steersman.

With some reluctance Jake obeyed the order, for he half believed that the skipper might still be somewhat unreliable. But as he neared the rock, it divided itself into three, the largest portion being in the centre. A little nearer, and the rock on the left slowly disappeared, the centre section slowly reared itself on one end, and the other third rose quite clear of the water and waved itself in the air.

"Why, why, it's a whale!" gasped Jim.

"Sure it's a whale," grinned Dick. "What did you think it was?"

"Well, I've seen lots of whales, but they never looked like that!"

"Maybe you never saw one from a small boat before. How about it?"

Jim admitted that such was the case.

"Well, everything looks different and bigger from down low," said the skipper. "That accounts for your not recognizing it. He was a big baby too."

As they rounded the cape, Brown packed the boys off to bed. He himself was inured to the long night watches and could half doze as he sat at the wheel. They were making more than eight miles an hour, and he assured them that they would be half-way across the sound when they awakened. The smell of petrol was rather offensive to the boys in the confines of the cabin, and they felt a little seasick both from the odour and from the gentle roll of the tiny vessel. Finally they forgot everything until the smell of breakfast aroused them for a look out of the porthole. They were now, so they were told in answer to their inquiry about the nearby coast, sailing along the shore of Montague Island; before evening Ellamar would be reached.

"Had a little trouble with the engine last night, or we'd be farther up the coast," Brown informed them as he vibrated between the wheel and the galley stove. "I want to run into Ellamar, if you don't object. It's right on our course, and I want to see some friends. I aimed to go over next week, but this trip with you fellows will kill two birds with one stone. Don't object, do you?"

They both wished to object; but here they were enjoying the man's kindness and hospitality. They could not reasonably do otherwise than accede to his wishes. What were a few hours to them now? Valdez was just around the corner—this they knew from looking at the chart. And already they were certain that their friend Dirty Neck had been hopelessly outdistanced.

'Only—and here was the rub—Jim didn't like thoughts of the convivial Brown meeting friends in Ellamar. Suppose he should be tempted to imbibe without proper discretion while with these cronies of his?

CHAPTER XVI

THE LOST PROPELLER

FOR much of that morning the launch, with its one-man crew and its passenger list of two eager boys, cruised along the coast of Montague. They sighted an occasional seal, and water-fowl were everywhere; but it would have taken much more than these to distract their attention from the business that they had in hand.

Miles dragged; hours were endless. No doubt the skipper's thoughts centred about his approaching reunion with friends at Ellamar. Probably the boys could think of nothing else either; they were too much perturbed with anxiety concerning the effect this foregathering might have upon their fortunes. That there is many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, each boy knew very well. In this instance, Jim had adapted the old saying to read, "There's many a sip 'twixt the cup and the lip," for he was convinced that Dick Brown and John Barleycorn were friends of long standing, and that this friendship would be renewed and demonstrated with much strong water at Ellamar.

More than once he found himself tempted to lay the whole business before the friendly though hard-drinking skipper and to beseech him not to enter the little port. Doubtless if he had unbosomed himself, Dick would not have pooh-poohed his

request, but would have waited until his return towards Seward to participate in the orgy or whatever it was that awaited him and his friends. Yet Jim hesitated to make the request. After all, his suspicions might not be well founded; and he did not care to reveal his distrust of the older man.

The Naked Islands slipped by with the boys growing more fidgety and downcast. They now laid their course for harbour. In a very short time they would be tying to the dock and Dick would be out of their reach for good or ill. As the time drew near when they would have to change their course more to the north unless they were resigned to landing at Ellamar, Jim did manage to make what he thought was a happy mention of his affairs. "I wish we could run straight through to Valdez," he remarked. "The *Schley* will be in from the westward to-morrow. Jake and I could catch her there. It will save us a week of waiting."

Dick laughed. "What sort of craft do you think this is? Why, the *Schley* won't make Valdez till to-morrow noon, and we'll be there long before morning. That will give you all the time you need for this rush business of yours, won't it?"

"Of course it should. But what if we should break down, or run into a fog, or something else should happen to make us late?"

"Don't you worry about the fog. I could sail these waters blindfolded; I'll hurry up my own business in town, and before you're asleep to-night we'll be at sea again. I can make the run in six hours at the longest."

With that the boys had to be satisfied. Still it

was with solicitous hearts that they watched the skipper climb up the dock at Ellamar and disappear in the distance. To be so near to final victory and yet be faced with such uncertainty was enough to rouse most dire apprehensions of the outcome.

"We ought to have thought more of old Bill, and less of hurting Dick's feelings," Jake told his friend.

The *Schley* would certainly tie up at the Valdez wharf by to-morrow noon, and Dirty Neck would just as certainly rush down its gangplank as soon as it had been dropped on the wharf. That is, provided he had not already become unduly alarmed and chartered a boat of his own to win more surely this race for a fortune. Even now he might be somewhere out to sea in a hired craft, urging it to all possible speed in an effort to defeat them.

An hour passed, but no Dick Brown appeared. The boys had not even quitted the boat in all that time, but stood ready and impatient to cast off its lines as soon as the skipper should be on board. Since he still failed to appear, Jake proposed that they seize the boat and make the run by themselves. To this Jim would not listen. The sound was not Turnagain Arm—here they might easily lose themselves for sufficient time to eat up the slender margin yet remaining. When another hour had passed, the boys climbed up the dock to walk its length, nervous and impatient. If they could find some other craft with the crew aboard, they would seek an opportunity to get away. The only boat they could discover was a foul, dingy little

vessel with Siwash written in its every line. They climbed down into it and even inspected the smelly cabin, with resolute purpose to inveigle the Indian owner into bearing them to Valdez. But the Indian skipper was not on board. Pausing only to glance casually at the crude kayak lashed atop the cabin, they turned once more to the dock.

Lights twinkled starlike in the office and shacks and the few more pretentious houses of Ellamar when the boys decided on a search for Dick. In which cabin they would find him, they had no idea. They were absolutely convinced from his long delay that he would be in no condition to sail immediately. How they would entice him from his friends, how they would get him sobered up, were problems as yet unsolved. Yet this lack of a plan of campaign did not frighten them. They would find the means to accomplish all this when once they had encountered Brown himself.

However, they were destined not to meet with the derelict skipper. Instead, as they approached the first lighted shack, they discerned a small group, obviously composed of Siwash, approaching them. Each of these individuals appeared bent on monopolizing the conversation, until in the midst of the many-sided harangue one fell prostrate and began to writhe on the ground. Evidently he had been struck down by an assailant or fallen the victim of some fit-like seizure. His misfortune met with no compassion from his fellows, for one began to kick him violently and another commenced fumbling at his person. Then a third, apparently in defence of him who had fallen, began to expostu-

late, and even attempted to tear the band away from its fumbings with his parka.* An immediate blow drove her—for it was a squaw—reeling.

Jack, forgetful of his own troubles and uttering a cry much resembling a war whoop, with Jim at his heels, sprang at the cowardly natives. Before he could land a blow, they had fled.

Jim bent closely over the Siwash to ascertain what ailed him and asked of the squaw, "Drunk?"

"No—no drunk," the woman answered vehemently. "Him sick, him skookum sick!"

"All right. We'll help. Where do you live?"

"Me live Katalla. Boat there," and she pointed down toward the dock.

"We'll help. Come along. What's this?" Jim for the first time noticed a little Indian child hovering in the background.

"Him Alexandervitch—him belong me."

"What a lump of dirt! But all right, kiddie. Hop along with mother. We'll see to your dad."

Then, between them, the boys picked up the slight form of the Siwash and bore him to the dock. They met with considerable difficulty in getting their helpless burden down into the evil-odoured cabin but, helped by the squaw, they at length succeeded. Here the woman sat down on her haunches to await the recovery of her lord and master. The boys stood helpless and wordless until all at once they realized that the answer to their problem had been found.

"How long him get better?" Jin. eagerly asked.

The woman spread her hands in a gesture of

Long woollen shirt with hood.

uncertainty, "Um littl' time, um long time. No sabe!"

Jim hesitated and then, taking a roll of notes from his pocket, held them tantalizingly before the squaw's eyes. Never had she seen such wealth.

"Him heap money!" Jim slowly proclaimed. "One, two, three, ten, twenty, forty dollars! Him skookum money! We go Valdez. You take boat. Come too. Money all yours!"

The squaw's eyes gleamed and her fingers clutched at the wealth thus displayed.

"You come now—pronto?" Jim asked, still using language that he had heard old-timers employ in long-winded descriptions of their dealings with such people as this.

The squaw sank back to the floor.

"No can do. Him get well, go soon quick!" and she snapped her fingers to demonstrate how quickly the start would be made.

"No, right now! We hurry! We sail boat!" Jim still waved the notes about in his eagerness to break down the poor creature's refusal.

The Indian woman was fascinated, but obdurate.

"Me sorry. No can do. No can do!" She almost wailed the words.

Again the same wild thought of carrying out their plan to seize the craft and start out, flashed through Jim's mind. But could the squaw pilot them successfully? And would she? Whatever decision Jim might have arrived at was rendered unnecessary by the Siwash himself. He gave a gasp and gurgle and stirred on his foul bunk.

"Him better!" the squaw shrieked. "Him go long now!" She bent over her spouse, and a gusty explosion of clicks and growls and hisses erupted from her mouth.

"Money! Give me!" she commanded.

Jim was fairly hypnotized into acceding to her demand. Grabbing the shoulder of the recumbent man with one hand and waving the notes about, she shook him until his teeth must have rattled, all the time pouring out a perfect torrent of barbarous Siwash speech. Slowly the man got to his feet.

"Him good mans!" she said with wide-mouthed smile, pointing to the boys. "Him give heap money! Git!"

Her husband tottered feebly about, not yet sure of either mind or body. Then he grunted some command to his eager wife, who hastened to the lines that tied the vessel fast to the dock. But as yet he was not strong enough to get the engine going. Jim gently put him to one side and motioned towards the tiller. Then he himself started the engine.

"You good! You skookum good man!" the Indian said in appreciation. "Me sick, me velly sick! Better bye bye!"

"All right, chief!" said Jim joyfully. "You steer; I'll handle this baby."

Then out into the sea and the night they sailed on their way, hope once more triumphant and never a thought turned towards the recreant Brown. But the town lights had not yet disappeared when the engine stalled. Jim fussed and fumed without effect. It took the Indian, who doubtless had

mastered its idiosyncrasies through much experience of similar trouble, to bring life to the engine. And when she did respond to the skipper's manipulations, how slow she was! They had not gone more than five miles when they had this sluggishness emphatically demonstrated. Far behind them they discovered the lights of another small vessel. Hand over hand she overhauled them. In less than two hours, although their own engine was still struggling along, the other boat was abeam. The boys fairly shivered with apprehension. What if this was Dirty Neck! If so, the race was already lost!

"Ahoy there, Charley!" The words came roaring across the smooth water from the other craft. "What's the matter? Anchored or what? Why don't you sink that Siwash wreck and get a real outfit? And hang out a lantern—somebody will run you down!" The words were tantalizing though without real unkindness in their tone.

"Me no Siwash! Me Aleut!" he muttered to the boys.

"Where boat from, Charley? Those men—from Seward?"

"No, no Seward. Them Eyak. Go Lithcum. May be Valdez."

The other boat drew ahead. She was easily making two miles to their one. Before the boys could make up their minds to ask for passage, it was too late; their engine had stalled again.

Thus the night passed. They could not sleep. Each moment multiplied their fears. Each fresh breakdown of the engine sent them into a new

terror that they would be too late. But the Siwash, unperturbed, would always set things to right again; and on they would sail for a few more miles, or it might be rods. Worn out by impatience, they finally settled themselves with stoical fortitude to await the outcome of this final venture. If the engine failed entirely, all would be over; old Bill's mine would be gone. If it managed to creep in before noon, all would be well. They themselves were now helpless to change the final outcome.

But no more craft approached. They saw no lights of any kind except one beacon apparently far off their course that marked the entrance to Valdez harbour. Hope sprang anew, for with all their uncertain progress, the miles behind them had nevertheless increased by fits and breaks. When day dawned, the shore on either side seemed very close—they were in the passage that led to Valdez. And it did seem that here in this narrow strait the decrepit engine roused itself for the final spurt upon which so much depended.

"We'll make it sure—why, we could pretty near swim in from here, if we had to," said Jim passionately.

"Pretty long swim," Jake answered. "But if I could swim, I'd be willing to try it."

"She's going strong. I do believe she's speeding up at last! If she can only keep it up, we'll——"

He was interrupted by a sudden roar from the engine and its equally sudden silence as the Siwash threw out the switch. With a bound the Indian was at the stern; flat on his face, searching the

water with his eyes. He fumbled about a few moments and then turned towards the boys.

"Finish! Him finish!" he shrieked. "Screw, him all gone!"

He was right. The screw had either twisted from the shaft, or broken in two. It was gone. They were helpless. And Valdez was still six miles away!

CHAPTER XVII

THE ALEUT'S KAYAK

OTHER mishaps had befallen them, but this misfortune was not such as had been their lot. Then they had always been on their feet, fighting spirit roused, with something in front of them to be conquered. Now, there was nothing that could be done. They were helpless, adrift in a worthless, hopeless boat. It seemed that a decisive blow had been struck them and their cause. No wonder Jim sat stunned, stupefied by its finality. A total of four hundred miles—four hundred miles of mountains, glaciers, unbridged streams; four hundred miles of dodging eager enemies!

Now, with the goal immediately before their eyes, with old Bill's fortune all but under the protection of the Federal Government, to have everything, all the toilsome trekking, all the bitterness that had been endured, all the hard-won triumphs, all the chance of making old Bill happy and independent for the rest of his life—to have all this sunk in the sea with the propeller, was overwhelming. For many moments Jim could not tear his eyes away from the distant shore where lay Valdez with its land office in which their long journey should have had its happy ending. Haggard, desperate, he abandoned himself to sorrowful contemplation of what they had planned to do for their old

friend, of what they had actually endured for his sake.

At length, with a squaring of his shoulders, he turned to Jake and huskily said, "Better luck next time, old fellow. We did our best and failed. We'll simply have to take our medicine." Jake made no reply.

The Siwash skipper stared curiously at the overwrought boys, knowing that all was not right. They had impressed upon him their desire to be put ashore at Valdez as soon as possible, but they had not sought to make him understand how calamitous the delay of a few hours would be. Yet somehow he comprehended that this breakdown of his boat was full of tragedy for them, and he sympathized with all the power his barbaric nature owned. They had been kind to him—they had promised him skookum money. This money, he dimly realized, would not be fairly earned if these generous boys were disappointed through any failure of his. He felt himself under obligation to do something about it, and that at once. Shuffling first to one and then to the other, he smiled a wide Siwash smile, his big mouth opening from ear to ear, and patted each on the back. But no responsive smile greeted his friendly advance. Then, having patted them again, he slapped his own chest in a boastful manner.

"Me skookum man!" he declared. "Me skookum friend! Me go!"

He hurled a volley of words at his squaw sound asleep in the cabin below. In turn, she bounced to her feet, and sprang upon the cabin roof. The kayak was torn from its lashings and dropped into the

water, squaw at one end and husband at the other. With common accord, they both began shouting instructions to the boys. What Jim and Jake could not gather from the unintelligible words, they did from the canoe and the Indians' gestures.

The boys jumped to the rail and glanced down into the strange craft. It was a skin-covered canoe, high of bow and stern, completely decked over except for cockpits where the paddlers sit flat on the bottom, with legs stretched straight to the front. Usually the kayak is a one-man craft, with a waterproof coat, the *kamlika*, that, tightly lashed to the rim of the cockpit and laced about the paddler's wrists and neck, effectually protects the wearer and the hold of the vessel from the inroads of the sea. But this kayak was for a crew of two and there were no *kamlikas*. All in all it was a novel craft, but the boys, although uncertain of their ability to handle the unstable-looking boat, were willing to make one more try for the shore. The effort might prove suicidal, but at least they could die still trying.

No sooner had Jim taken his seat in the bow, than Jake began to stow himself away in the stern opening and to draw out the paddle that he felt beneath him. The Indian would not have it so. He kept motioning for Jake to crouch down lower in the pit; the boy made it plain by much gesticulating that he could do no paddling if he obeyed. In spite of his protests, the Siwash kept pushing the boy down. At last Jim understood.

"He wants you to get clear under the deck, head and all," he cried. "He means to come along, too!"

The Indian smiled his understanding of Jim's words. Jake's eyes popped at the thought of lying there in the darkness without power to see a single thing on this rush through the water. Still he obediently squirmed under the deck. An unpleasant shock awaited him—it seemed that all the fish in the sea must have been dumped at one time into that narrow hold, and that the refuse had been rotting and fermenting until it emitted a gas that would annihilate him by its smell. He would suffocate—he would die a horrible death from that unspeakable odour! But with a submissive gasp, he worked his way forward to make room for the Indian, who now began climbing in, his skin-clad feet kicking Jake on the head as he urged him farther forward.

Last hurried instructions were clicked and grunted to the squaw; she gurgled something in reply. They were off. Jim found the paddling not so difficult. The kayak is almost as stable as an ordinary canoe, and now, with its crew of three instead of two, it sat a little low in the water. Soon Jim caught the feel of the paddle. His heart beat fast as he began to believe once more that all was not necessarily lost. He called down to Jake the progress they were making, but at the end of the very first mile he found himself in torture. It was not the labour of paddling—it was the constrained, unusual position his lower body was forced to occupy without the least chance of relief. After minutes of this agony, a numbness ensued and he soon forgot everything except the necessity for making speed. Strong and wiry by nature, with every muscle

hardened by the sports of the past summer and the recent pack-bearing, he knew himself able to finish the remaining miles without a rest.

The water with its tiny wavelets drifted by. Luckily no hampering wind blew off the glaciers for which the Valdez back country is noted. But the way had been scarcely half traversed when the Indian grunted to command Jim's attention. The boy glanced back, and in the distance beheld smoke wreathing upward beyond a screening headland. The swirling smoke was still miles astern, but it was coming nearer—the *Schley* with its powerful engines was overtaking them! Jim estimated the remaining distance to shore as calmly and accurately as he could. He compared their own speed with that of the steamer. Could they make it—that was the question. He must make it! He would make it! New power streamed down his arms and out the paddle's length.

"Oh, Jake!" he called down to the suffocating boy. "We still have a chance, but it's mighty slim. The *Schley* is right behind!"

Then, saving his breath for the struggle still before him, he sent the water foaming from the paddle tip. For a time they seemed to fly. Then the kayak began to drag. Jim redoubled his efforts, if that were possible, and instantly the canoe began to act in a crazy manner. No longer did it hold its course straight for the distant town. He looked back at the stern paddler, seeking explanation for this behaviour of the boat.

There the Siwash sat, head bowed down in front but with hands still grasping his paddle. What

could be wrong? "Hey, you!" Jim cried. "Get busy, I can't do it all!"

The Indian neither answered nor stirred. He had dropped off into a coma like that which had troubled him at Ellamar! Jim stopped paddling, his own head sunk on his breast as if he too were seized with that same spell. Now all hope was certainly gone! The *Schley* was almost upon them. He could never make the shore in time. Why, he could not even guide the canoe! The man in the stern had to do that; and in the stern there was a helpless man, perhaps a dead man, with the steering paddle in his hand.

He was roused from stupor by Jake's kicking him in the back.

"What's wrong, Jim, what's wrong? What are you stopping for? Anything I can do?" issued in hollow tones from the kayak's hidden hold.

Was there anything Jake could do? Jim wearily considered the matter. No, there was nothing; nothing could be done by a boy confined below deck. But there was no reason why Jake should not know the bitter truth.

"The Siwash has another fit—he's out for keeps. And the *Schley* is right behind!"

"Let me out! I can paddle if he can't. Help me out, I tell you. Don't give up now!"

But how could Jake escape from his prison? How could the Indian be disposed of? Jim's brain at first refused to work. What was the gain in thinking? Facts confronting him were only too plain. He himself could not handle the craft alone except so slowly that any headway gained would be useless

He had a man no better than dead in the stern, the important cockpit. The kayak itself possessed no inherent stability of its own. Any movement of its occupants had always to be nicely calculated so that perfect balance should be maintained. Just at present the Indian's inert form was in such a position that the canoe rode on even keel in the air, but the Indian's body pendent from the cockpit would hold the craft bottom side up. The Siwash, and Jake too—for Jake could not escape from the cell-like hold—would be drowned! There was no possibility of either's escape. True, this human element was the only disturbing factor, for there was no sea to cause rolling of the craft. The problem had stated itself—in some way Jake and the Indian must now change places, an attempt fraught with the greatest risk for all concerned. But there still might be time! And if there was time, the chance ought to be taken!

His resolution formed, Jim called in a shaky voice to his friend, "Jake, will you risk drowning for old Bill's sake?"

There was no perceptible interval between Jim's question and Jake's muffled answer:

"I sure will! I've done it before and come up all to the good, and I'm ready to try it again! Anyway, I'd as soon drown as be stunk to death! What's the use of living without friends? I'll never have any friends now! They'll all run from me like they would from a polecat!" Jake's reply was not couched in elegant language, but he exactly voiced his feelings. Any change would be for the better.

Although he was relieved by his comrade's ready

compliance, Jim realized' only too well his own responsibility for the final outcome. But he determined to make the effort. He therefore called, "Jake, if you're still lying on your back, turn over. And be as careful as you can."

Then ensued a silence during which Jim could feel the kayak quivering as Jake manoeuvred to make his about-face. Careful as Jake was, had Jim not counteracted the swaying movement of the canoe by opposing movements of his own body, the kayak would have capsized. Finally this quivering ceased.

"All right, Jim, I'm over. What next?" The words sounded even more sepulchral, almost like an echo in fact, for Jake had his face to the foul bottom of the canoe.

"Now listen, Jake. You and that Siwash must change places. Get him by his feet and drag him down inside with you. But be careful! Don't make any quick moves or over we go!"

The cockpit was small, and the Indian, slight though he was, filled it to the full with his body and cumbrous clothing. Underneath the deck, Jake gripped a rib of the kayak with his toes, and grasped the Indian's ankles with his hands. He gave a tug, and then another. The Siwash did not slide down a single inch. Then the boy gave another pull, exerting all the power of which he was capable. Results were instantly apparent. The Indian's body slid deeper into the hold, but at the same time it settled to one side, and the kayak went over on her beam. Jim automatically swung to counteract this movement, but he shifted too far. The kayak

instantly responded by rolling to its opposite side. Jim's heart crowded into his throat; but by degrees he stopped the pendulum-like swing of the crazy craft.

In the darkness beneath the deck Jake felt the startling movements of his prison and braced himself to lie quiet until equilibrium should be restored. As soon as the canoe settled to an even keel, Jim's voice sounded once more in high-pitched tones. "All right, old boy. But go easy! Another movement like that and over we go. We'll stay over too!"

Jake sought a new hold for his toes, but he was now so closely crowded against Jim that he could not use his full strength. Yet working slowly and patiently he made some progress until the Indian's body wedged fast.

"Watch out, Jim. He's stuck. I've got to try harder."

Jim prepared himself for the uncertain lurch that must ensue. A mighty tug by Jake with almost disastrous results followed. The Indian did not yield. Another tug came with its accompanying hair-raising swing of the kayak. Still the Indian's body refused to budge. His loose clothing had slid up about his body, and the mass, anchored under his armpits, packed itself tightly into the cockpit's rim.

"I can't stir him, Jim. I can't get any room for any purchase; I'm too close to you. I guess it's all off now!"

Jim did not despair. So far no helpful result had been attained. But something might yet be done

ere the steamer speeding astern, clearly visible and already whistling for the port, should put them out of the race.

"It's my turn now," Jim called just as if he had not been sharing the other's efforts. "Lie still as can be. We've come to the place where it's do or die. There's just about one chance in a hundred!"

First depositing the paddle underneath the deck, Jim slowly and methodically began extricating himself from his own cockpit. He was young and agile, but his legs were almost numb, and the contortions required of him by the necessity of shifting face to stern were almost beyond his powers to effect. How he succeeded he never knew. But at length he found himself on his knees in the cockpit, his face towards the Siwash, whose head and shoulders still showed impassive and immovable as at the first.

"I'm going to crawl along the deck and work on him myself," he told Jake. "You can feel what I'm about, but don't do a single thing until I tell you."

Then Jim hitched himself along the deck, his feet dragging in the water alongside, the craft swaying to his every movement. His was a perilous attempt. Trained paddlers can with a swing of their body and a sweep of their paddle, when protected by the *kamlika*, make a complete rotation of the craft and come up smiling. What Jim was now doing was even more difficult. Perched astride the deck as he was, the canoe's centre of gravity was brought dangerously high above the water-line. If it had not been for Jake, who was absolutely recumbent on the very bottom, and for the Siwash,

who was likewise well down into the hold, the effort would doubtless have been fatal.

Holding his breath, and with almost imperceptible movement, Jim made his way sternward, and at last reached the Siwash! It took but a few moments to release the man's parka. Happily he continued under the spell. If the Indian had partially recovered and made one spasmodic movement, the effort would have been in vain. They would have turned turtle. And now calling loudly for Jake's assistance in working the man forward, Jim guided his body through the opening and watched it disappear from sight. Cautiously he then turned himself about and inserted his own limbs and hips into the vacant pit. For Jake to work himself up into the bow and then back again into the front opening did not consume many moments.

As he settled into his seat, Jake gave a loud "Whoosh!" Then he added, "If ever again I get 'tween decks in a thing like this, it'll be only when I'm in the shape that Indian is!"

He shuddered as the fresh air crowded into his lungs, and began to retch so violently that Jim had all he could do to maintain the kayak's equilibrium. Poor Jake! The struggle in the confines of the reeking hold had been too much—his face looked green and ghastly from the severe nausea. But when Jim bade him look at the onrushing steamer, he steeled himself to action.

They got under way and were only a mile from the harbour front when the steamer tooted her warning that she was about to pass. Every muscle

of arm and shoulder and back was forced to do their will. Sweat poured off the boys in streams. But they could not increase their speed by any measure, however small. Indeed, it was a question whether they could maintain their present rate until the beach was reached. As the steamer began to rush past them on her way to the landing, Jake ceased paddling.

"What's the use?" he wheezed. "We can't beat her now. We've already lost out! Let's give it up!"

Momentarily Jim also stopped the sway of his paddle, to stare up hopelessly as the steamer's bow swept past. His eye caught the lettering of her name high up above him. Instantly his paddle churned the water again. "It's not the *Schley*!" he panted. "Look up there! See her name! It's the *Mariposa*!"

Another roaring whistle blast drowned out his words. He glanced back. There, racing scarce her own length behind the *Mariposa*, another steamer came foaming along.

"The *Schley* is back there! Dig in, Jake, dig in!" he frantically screamed. "We still have a chance. If you ever worked in your life, show now what you can do!"

The moment's rest and Jim's shrill cry fired the other to his task.

"I'm with you to the finish!" he feebly shouted. "I'll stick along with you!"

Like a cork they bounced in the waves hurled from the *Mariposa*'s prow. And like a cork they rode the waves. They were dimly conscious of a group on the afterdeck shouting encouragement to

them, for the passengers believed them to be two Indian lads who were racing the steamer for a bit of fun. High above the cries of the passengers and the slow exhaust of the engine--for the *Mariposa* had already begun her glide for the wharf--a vigorous voice challenged them. •

Jim looked up, all the while wielding his paddle--neither boy would lose a beat. What was the man saying?

"Jim, Jim, my boy! And Jake, you young sinner! What are you doing in that bidarka?"

Whose voice was that? What was it saying? Jim ceased to paddle, his brain and his arms would not function together.

"Jim, Jim! I'm your dad! What are you trying to do? Don't you know you'll be drowned?"

Then it registered. Up there on the afterdeck was his own father! Jim gave one exultant wave of his paddle towards the shore.

"Make for the land office, Dad! Get to the land office as soon as you can. We'll see you there!"

The *Mariposa* charged on. Behind, almost in her immediate wake, the *Schley* followed. Evidently her master felt some compulsion to dock as soon as possible. But the boys were undismayed by her nearness. They strained at their paddles. Gone was all the fatigue. Blisters inflamed by salt water were unfelt. Cramps were unnoticed. For there on the *Mariposa* was an ally who had never failed them; on her decks was weighty help, sufficient to swing the balance in their favour, if they could achieve that balance! Strong and true, rhythmic and powerful, swept the

paddles. On the forward deck of the *Schley*, a man shook his fists at them and blasphemed under his breath. But the boys paddled on! The kayak darted faster than any Siwash crew had ever driven her over the few hundred yards that separated them from the beach. Final victory or hopeless defeat was only that far ahead.

Soon just beyond the bow was the shore, all mire and slime. Straight as a rifle bullet, the kayak swept through the shallows to smash the mud a sullen slump. The boys, on legs that could hardly support their aching bodies, so cramped had they become, scrambled from the cockpits.

"Take care of this boat till we get back. I'll pay you well. There's a Siwash still aboard," Jim shrieked to a man in another boat close by.

Then slowly at first, but gathering speed as leg muscles limbered, they rushed towards the nearest street. The *Schley* was drawing to the dock. Her lines had already been hurled to the wharf. On her deck stood an eager man, ready to spring ashore as soon as distance made it possible.

"Where's the land office?" Jim croaked at the first stranger.

"Straight up this street two blocks. You'll see the sign out front!" the man shouted as they passed him.

The wearied boys gulped their breath in wheezing gasps. The *Schley* sounded her whistle—she landed! How their sides ached! How their feet dragged! Would they make it? Could they beat that man on the *Schley*?

Passers-by on their way to greet the steamers

The Aleut's Kayak

made room for them as they half staggered, ran down the street. One block was covered. The second was interminable. But there across street was the land office! Triumphant they burst through the door and up to the counter.

"H-h-h-here, Mister! Enter this 'quick!"

panted.

Then with hearts and lungs alike pounding, they managed to gasp forth the description of their claims. When one failed, the other prompted. Exhausted and breathless were they that the clerk found it quite possible to write faster than they could speak.

"But whose claim is it?" the clerk demanded.

"They belong to Bill, Bill Laughlin," whispered Jim as he reeled towards the floor. "Bill said you know the name!" Then Jim fainted.

"I sure do know Bill Laughlin. Bully for you! Must be something good to run off your legs like this!" shouted the clerk as he vaulted the counter to Jim's assistance.

As the clerk bent over the prostrate boy, Dick Neck rushed in.

"Those boys are thieves—they're trying to steal my claims!" he cried to the clerk. "Here are descriptions I want filed!"

He thrust the paper, still covered with its oil-paper wrapper, into the clerk's hands.

"Just a minute, Guthrie, just a minute, now! What's your rush?" the clerk protested. But he took the paper and with the greatest deliberation read its contents. Then he looked up curiously.

descriptions these kids brought in. They're entered and you're not! You'll have to fight it out some other way."

The incautious Dirty Neck lost all self-control. He seemed ready to stamp Jim into the floor. The clerk swept around between him and the prostrate boy.

"None of that, Guthrie!" he sternly ordered. "You pick on someone your own size."

"Me, for instance!" challenged a big voice, and another bearded man surged towards Dirty Neck. "Just take me on if you want a fight! Tackle the old man instead of the boy, why don't you? Think I don't know you and what you are? Remember the time I ran you out of Dawson? You're going to run again, right now! Move quick!"

He took one step towards Dirty Neck, and Dirty Neck stepped towards the door. He kept on stepping. Safety lay outside.

Jake had bent over his unconscious friend, himself oblivious to the heated words about him. He was sobbing, "Jim, old partner, wake up, wake up! Everything's all right, Jim. Wake up, oh please wake up! I tell you, you've won, you've won!"

The bearded man gently pushed Jake aside and gathered Jim to his breast. "I don't know what you've been doing," he tenderly said, "but you've certainly given your best."

Jim sighed as his eyes opened, and his arms crept about his father's neck. "It hasn't been a picnic, Dad. But oh, Dad, we've had the mush of a lifetime!" Then he began to laugh in a queer hysterical way.

"believe it," said Mr. Conover shortly. "But brace up. I want to hear all about it. You boys are coming with me. Please call a cab!" he requested the clerk.

Before the cab drew up in front, the boys had panted out their story, or rather the meaning of it all. "Save the rest for another time," the father commanded. "Laughlin cabled me about that strike. Looks like he has finished with prospecting at last. But that trip almost finished you as well."

Then he began to sniff. "Smells like you fellows need a bath. What's wrong anyhow?"

"It's me!" admitted the mortified Jake. "Did you ever smell anything worse? I'm a regular rubbish dump!"

"We'll soon fix that up. There's the cab; so run along. Everything all right with that entry, Mr. Clerk?" he demanded of the land-office man.

"Right as can be," answered the man. "They never forgot a word! I'll see that no shenanigans are worked. I know Laughlin myself."

"Come on, boys. We'll get you both fixed up and then we'll see what is the next thing to be done." And Mr. Conover hustled them both into the cab.

When in the cab and later in the hotel whither they had been taken, they told in greater detail about how they had made the mush. Mr. Conover, who had not interrupted with a single question, eyed the boys until they became uneasy. They knew not what to expect. But all he did was to put his arms around both and give them a squeeze, the only way he had of expressing his pride and gratitude. For sourdough that he himself was, he needed

no elaborate description of their journey to understand exactly what they had dared.

When at length he released them, he said sternly, "Now listen here! I know you've struck it rich. That lode must be a wonder. Old Bill never exaggerated in all his life. Just as soon as I received his cable, I prepared to start north, and here I am. I mean to look things over before the big snows come. When does your school start, do you know?"

"I don't even know what day of the week this is," Jim answered.

"You don't, eh?" smiled Mr. Conover. "What does it matter? I guess you'll do. Want to run up and see Bill for a week or so?"

The boys answered never a word. They knew Mr. Conover too well. Something was in the air.

"Well, I'm going to make you go along with me on the *Mariposa*. I may need some real mushers on the trail. I'm getting old, myself. Think you can make it?"

"I'm tired," Jim answered with a grin, "but I guess I can make the grade!"

"Huh!" Jake to the very end seconded his partner. "I think I can make it too."

